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# RETHINKING THREAT IN CHINA'S SOUTH PACIFIC PRESENCE

Stephen Noakes<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** This article probes the methodological basis for the determination of China as a threat in the South Pacific. China threat theory contends that the growing Chinese presence in Pacific Island Countries (PICs) poses multifaceted risks. This contention, though premised on sound data regarding the scale and pace of Chinese aid, investment, and military development, has not been properly vetted social scientifically, and plausible alternative explanations for China's South Pacific policy have not been rigorously tested or evaluated. The article suggests the integration and testing of a range of competing hypotheses in order for future studies to provide a more accurate, holistic picture of any threat China poses, and to better account for the as-yet-mostly unstudied responses of PIC populations and governments to China's changing regional role.

**Keywords:** China, threat theory, geopolitics, Belt and Road Initiative, Pacific Island Countries, Indo-Pacific

## Introduction

Scholarship on the dangers of China's global rise has been animated by two competing and incommensurate positions—either China is a threat, or it is not. The former view is grounded in a realist logic of relative gains, and holds that China poses an inherent threat to international order because any advantages associated with its rise necessarily come at the expense of those of others, namely the United States and its allies.<sup>1</sup> For those in this camp, the emergence of a strategic rival (in fact, any capable rival—not only China) is intrinsically destabilising, and the zero-sum nature of international politics means it cannot be any other way.<sup>2</sup> By contrast, the latter group comprises those whom we might collectively call critics of the so-called China threat hypothesis. Notably, it counts the Beijing central government among its foremost adherents, which time and again across successive generations of state leadership has reaffirmed its commitment

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to rising peacefully and sees a multipolar world in which China holds a prominent role as both possible and desirable.<sup>3</sup> However, it also incorporates a range of other scholarly efforts to test, debunk, or modify the China threat argument from an assortment of empirical, theoretical, and historical angles.<sup>4</sup>

While opinion is by no means unanimous, the China-as-threat perspective is perhaps the dominant one in the Western world at the time of this writing, and features prominently in the views of thought leaders and policymakers. Influenced heavily by works like those of John Mearsheimer and Christopher Layne, in which China's benign rise is all but impossible and can at most be only slowed or contained, it has become common in US circles to frame the rivalry in terms of a renewal of Cold War-era bipolarity.<sup>5</sup> At times, this tendency comes complete with the scapegoating of China for US misfortunes, as in the case of President Donald Trump blaming China for the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic and referring to it publicly as the "China virus."<sup>6</sup> The tone is much the same among the United States' 'Five-Eyes' partners in the Pacific, where China's aid, investment, and military build-up has increased in recent years. As of late 2020, Australia is experiencing a historic low in its diplomatic ties with China.<sup>7</sup> In New Zealand, China ties have cooled considerably under the Labour-led government of Jacinda Ardern from their high-point under the National-led government of John Key, and discussions of untoward Chinese influence in politics animate the news with frequency.<sup>8</sup>

The central premise of this article is that perceptions of China's threat to the South Pacific region may be overblown, not because the theory underpinning these is conceptually flawed, but because this theory has remained, in a sense, too theoretical—i.e. it has not been subjected to testing of sufficient breadth, nor has appropriate evidence been presented to warrant concrete conclusions about whether China is a threat, to whom, or how. At the heart of this argument is the Popperian criterion of falsificationism, which holds that social scientific findings must be subject to legitimate opportunities for disconfirmation in order to be credible.<sup>9</sup> It is extremely unsurprising that so many perceive China to be a threat when the question of its intentions in the Pacific or elsewhere has not yet been studied in manner that could possibly have led to any other finding. China might well appear more threatening than it actually is because we have not yet applied paradigms capable of yielding confounding data or contrary interpretations of existing data. Until this situation is rectified and potentially exculpatory evidence sees the light of day, China's threat in the South Pacific will remain primarily a matter of scholarly conjecture.

Of course, any suggestion of confirmation bias carries an implicature that alternative approaches are available, useful, and desirable. This article outlines two possibilities, one premised on domestic Chinese determinants of its foreign policy, and another that distinguishes the interests of Pacific states from those of the two rival super powers, and creating a more nuanced, variegated picture of the intentionality and effect of Chinese

behaviour. Together, they comprise an agenda for future research on China's activities in the Pacific and, as I argue below, serve as a compliment—not a replacement—to the more realism-inspired and geopolitically-oriented theories which lend themselves to threat perceptions and have dominated the literature up until now. The goal is to arrive at a more fully-specified model that takes comprehensive account of the wide range of factors at play and, ultimately, to forge understanding of China's Pacific presence based on as well-rounded an inquiry as possible.

The remainder of the paper is made up of three main parts. In the section immediately below, I briefly sketch what precisely is meant by China's growing "presence" in the Pacific over the last fifteen years, focusing in particular on investment, development aid, and military build-up. Next, I explore the primary perspective from which these behaviours have heretofore been studied and enumerate the key explanations and variables identified, including strategic competition with Taiwan, the United States, and other regional players in the Pacific such as Australia and New Zealand, and the "resource thirst" hypothesis. A third section then examines the consequences of this established mode of thinking and suggests two new approaches which, if developed and utilized on future research, could lend greater nuance to the debate over China's regional rise.

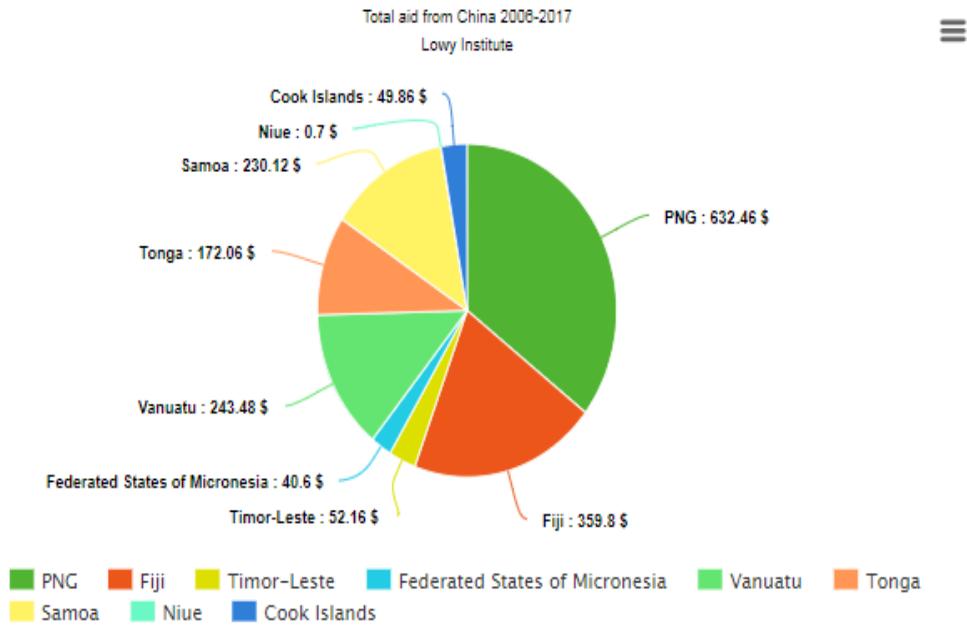
### **China's Pacific Engagement: Aid, Investment, and Militarisation**

Recent research supports the finding of a growing and significant Chinese presence in the South Pacific in terms of military-buildup, aid and economic investment. Derived from a multiplicity of sources, these data are accurate and reliable, with little room for dispute.

#### *Aid*

First, a colossal scholarly effort has gone into gauging the nature and extent of development aid from China to Pacific Island Countries (PICs) over the last decade and a half. Indeed, too much has been written on this subject for it to be fully catalogued here. However, it is more than clear that aid expenditures in the region have been steadily rising, and that China has begun to eclipse some traditional aid providers in the Pacific Islands. Figure 1 below shows total disbursement of Chinese aid to PICs for the period 2006-17, with breakdowns for each recipient nation. Papua New Guinea leads the way with approximately one third of the region's allocation at 632 billion USD. Fiji follows for the same period at about 360 billion USD. Figure 2 shows the relative disbursement of all leading aid donors to the region over the same period. While Australia remains far-and-away the largest donor overall, Chinese disbursements have reached a rough parity with those of the United States. However, Chinese commitments in recent years suggest it may overtake the rest of the pack, having pledged nearly four times as much as Australia in 2018.<sup>10</sup>

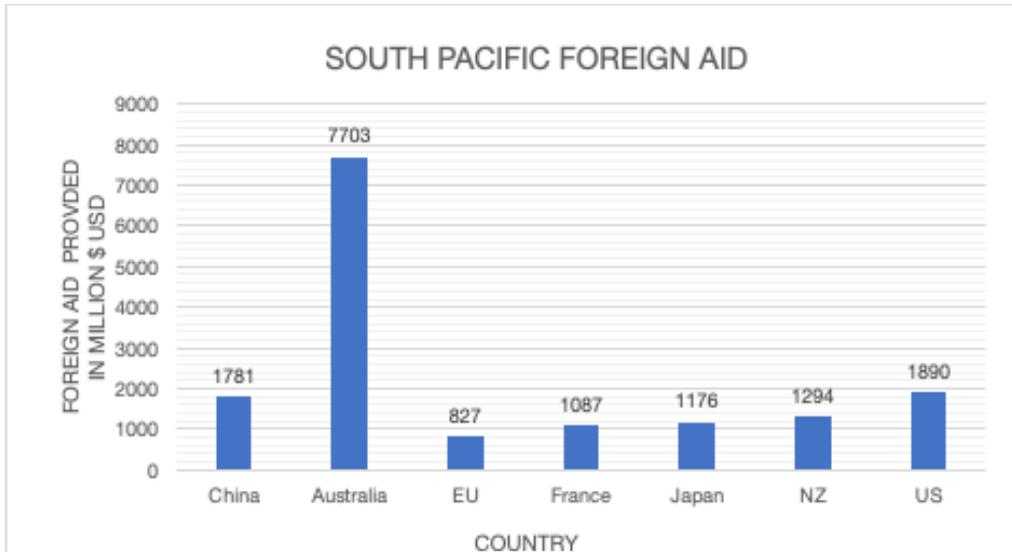
Figure 1: Total Chinese aid to Pacific region 2006-17 = US\$1.781 Bn.



How exactly is this money delivered, and what does it fund? China’s 2011 State Council White Paper sets out a practical blueprint for China’s aid, which is overwhelmingly disbursed on a bilateral basis, in the form of either interest-free loans, concessional loans, and, much less commonly, as cash grants.<sup>11</sup> More than eighty percent is now estimated to be given in the form of concessional loans.<sup>12</sup>

Philippa Brant has outlined the eight programmatic categories in which these three main funding types are channeled throughout the Pacific. These include complete projects, goods and materials, technical cooperation, human resource development cooperation, medical teams sent abroad, emergency humanitarian aid, volunteer program and debt relief.<sup>13</sup> However, a fourth type of funding, termed “natural resource-backed loans and lines of credit” is increasingly common. Under this scheme, “a given recipient country uses its natural resources to attract and guarantee an infrastructure loan from China on better commercial terms than it is likely to get from commercial banks.”<sup>14</sup> Such loans typically finance large pieces of infrastructure, such as bridges, heliports, or seaports, with natural resource exports used as collateral to guarantee repayment. Figure 3 below gives a breakdown of this funding by sector, with the bulk of such loans tending to fund transportation infrastructure, such as seaports, airfields, and road maintenance.<sup>15</sup>

Figure 2: Leading aid donors to Pacific states, by country (in USD, as of 2018).

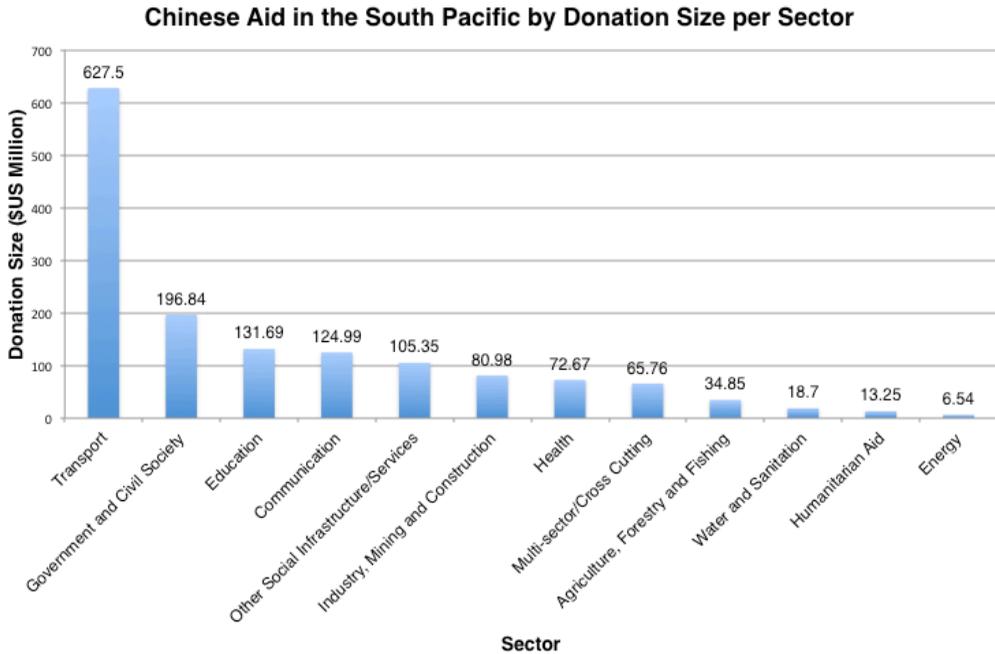


Though China favours aid disbursement through direct, government-to-government contact, it is worth pointing out that its aid regime is evolving rapidly, having been centralized in 2018 under the newly-created China International Development Cooperation Agency (CIDCA). Beijing also shows signs of branching out into more diverse delivery modes, including several relevant to PICs. For example, China is the key backer of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) Cooperation Fund, which, among its many other economic and education-based initiatives, made provisions for Covid-19 response and recovery in the Pacific in September 2020. “Support for trade and investment facilitation is particularly important as we work with Forum Member countries over the coming months and years to support regional economic recovery from COVID-19,” said Secretary-General Dame Meg Taylor.<sup>16</sup>

China’s long-time support of the PIF has led to the wider adoption of multilateralism as a tool in the region, where disbursements are often made under the banner of China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), sometimes referred to as the “Maritime Silk Road” in the context of PICs. A flagship foreign policy of Xi Jinping, the policy envisages the creation of a globally integrated network of infrastructure development projects meant to facilitate and deepen commercial ties, including with PICs. As Fong Toy, Deputy Secretary General for the Pacific Islands Forum has remarked, “The Maritime Silk Road

allows us to envisage greater connectivity across the ocean, releasing the potential of our people to build closer links with neighbouring countries, both near and far, and to release the potential of our maritime and island resources to create employment and raise our living standards.<sup>17</sup> Convened in Beijing in May 2017, the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation is perhaps the most prominent example of China's growing turn to multilateralism as a means of aid provision, resulting in a huge range of new allocations to projects relevant to PICs, including 100 new poverty alleviation projects, new lending schemes for the Export-Import and China development Banks in the tens of billions (USD), and the contribution of more than 100 billion RMB to the Silk Road Fund.<sup>18</sup>

Figure 3: Chinese Aid in the South Pacific by Donation Size per Sector, as of 2017.



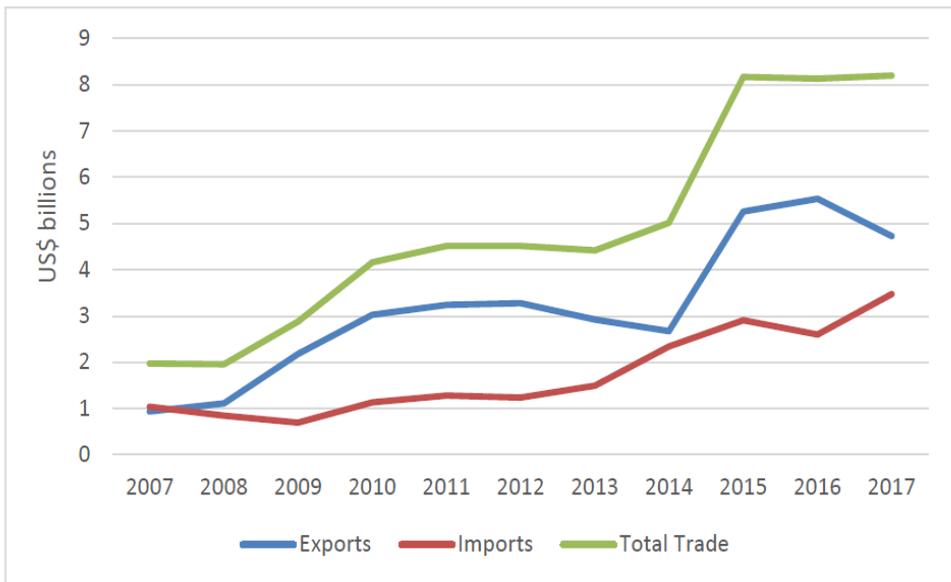
Investment

Second, as a corollary to the increase in aid, Chinese foreign direct investment (FDI) to the region has been rising as well. The US-China Economic and Security Review Commission suggests an increase of 173 percent between 2014 and 2016, an influx of 2.8 billion in USD.<sup>19</sup> Their report goes on to state that some 70 percent of this amount

is concentrated in Papua New Guinea, which since 2005 has seen two mining projects attract more than 970 million in Chinese FDI. Aside from mining, investments have occurred in the infrastructure, real estate, and communications sectors. Some of the largest include an expenditure of 4.4 billion USD, approved by the PNG government in 2017, for a suite of road, industrial park, and water supply upgrade projects by China Railway Group, and a 500 million USD tourist resort in Fiji led by Guangdong Silk Road Ark Investment.<sup>20</sup> In October 2016, Chinese telecommunications giant Huawei announced it would construct a national broadband network in PNG, with connectivity to the Solomon Islands to follow the next year.<sup>21</sup>

The same report indicates that China’s trade with PICs increased by “a factor of four” over the same period. A 63 percent spike in Chinese exports to the region followed an official visit by Xi Jinping in 2014. In 2017, exports to PIF countries topped 4.7 billion USD, nearly doubling in less than 3 years’ time.<sup>22</sup> This trend is shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4: China’s Trade with Pacific Island Countries (2007–2017).



Note: This graph excludes trade with Australia and New Zealand and includes all PIF members; data for Niue were unavailable. Source: General Administration of Customs via CEIC database.

### Militarisation

Finally, there is the matter of China's military buildup in the Pacific. Unlike aid, which has attracted more scholarly attention, most of the details compiled to this point have come from inside the United States security establishment. This is mostly likely attributable to the twin factors of sensitivity (i.e. prior to being made public the information originates from classified intelligence and counter-intelligence operations) and timeliness (i.e. the projected pace and scale of the buildup is such that the lengthy process of academic publishing could not keep pace). The available data are virtually unanimous in suggesting that China's military professionalization and upgrades are proceeding apace. That this is the case is not disputed.<sup>23</sup>

The latest available figures indicate that Chinese military spending is continuing to rise, albeit more slowly year-on-year than was the case in the early 2010s. The official estimate from the Beijing central government is that China will spend a nominal \$178.6 billion USD on its military in 2020, up slightly from \$177.5 billion USD, notwithstanding Covid-19-induced budget crunches, from which China is not immune. The continued funding push reflects a broader commitment from China's leadership to its stated goal of modernising the People's Liberation Army (PLA) by 2035, and achieving a "world class" military by 2049, the one-hundredth anniversary of the regime.<sup>24</sup>

What justifies this expenditure, from China's perspective? The 2019 White Paper on Defense acknowledges the need for military upgrades for defensive purposes, stating that the PLA "still lags behind the world's leading militaries." It also acknowledges escalating geostrategic competition, and lays the blame on the United States:

International strategic competition is on the rise. The US has adjusted its national security and defense strategies, and adopted unilateral policies. It has provoked and intensified competition among major countries, significantly increased its defense expenditure, pushed for additional capacity in nuclear, outer space, cyber and missile defense, and undermined global strategic stability. NATO has continued its enlargement, stepped up military deployment in Central and Eastern Europe, and conducted frequent military exercises.<sup>25</sup>

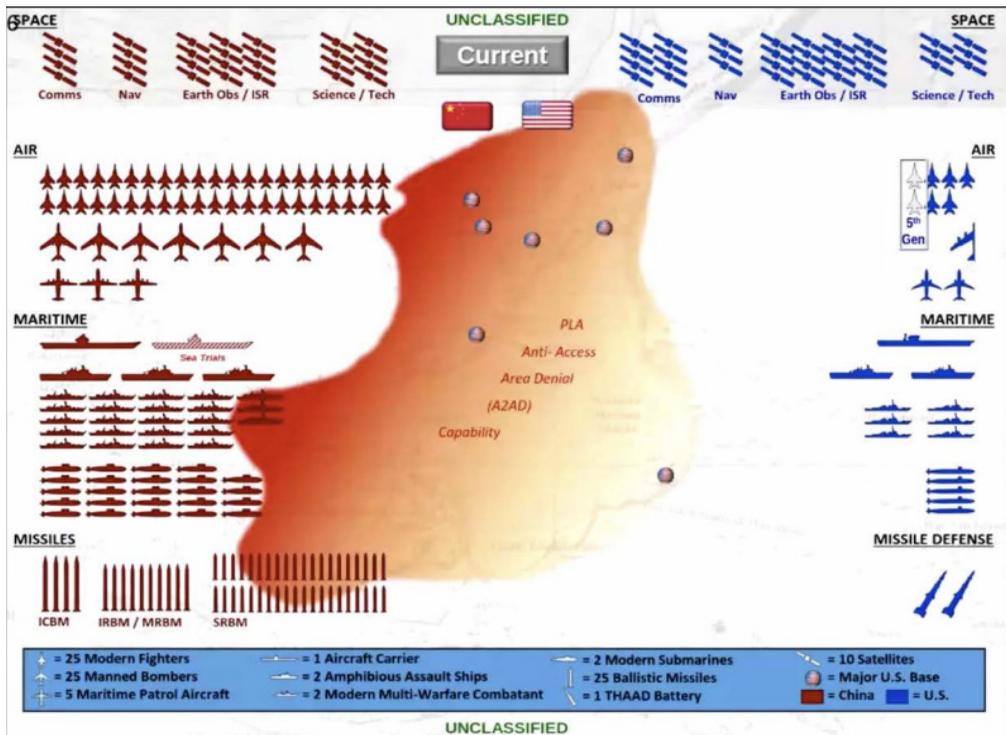
Crucially, however, the White Paper reaffirms China's commitment to rising peacefully, and denies that a challenge to the US necessarily means conflict. "Though a country may become strong, bellicosity will lead to its ruin," it reads. It further asserts that "The security situation in the Asia-Pacific is generally stable," and that "Asia-Pacific countries have a stronger sense of a community of shared destiny," though it does not mention competition with the US or its allies in the South Pacific specifically.<sup>26</sup> That is not to say, of course, that the situation is not subject to change, or that Washington does not view

it with increasing gravity. Indeed, in successive US reports since 2017, the US government has adopted a very tough line on China, driven by China’s investment in military capabilities, to which China may be expected to respond.<sup>27</sup>

Though the Chinese government has not publicly clarified what it means by “world class” military, there is an expectation that the intention is to transform the PLA into a force equal or superior to that of the US and its allies. Indeed, a 2020 report of the Department of Defense to the US Congress indicates that China has either matched or overtaken the US in several key areas of military development, including shipbuilding, land-based conventional ballistic and cruise missiles and integrated air defense systems. It also acknowledges the PLA Navy as the largest fighting force afloat, the PLA Army as the world’s largest standing ground force, and identifies the South Pacific as a “known focus area of PLA planning” for military logistics.<sup>28</sup>

INDO-PACOM, headquartered in Honolulu, tracks China’s military build-up in the Pacific region. Figure 5, produced for series of briefings in mid-2019, highlights the nature and scale of US concerns.

Figure 5: Chinese Military assets in Indo-Pacific, Relative to US, 2019 (INDO-PACOM).



The dire message conveyed in the graphic is even more startling when one considers that is only a snapshot of the present—it does not take into account projects of the next two to three decades, during which the pace of Chinese asset development is expected to increase, as noted above.

The interpretation of this information by the US and its allies is addressed more deeply in the latter section of this article. However, others have criticised the INDO-PACOM briefings for painting an unnecessarily alarmist picture. For example, Hans Kristensen of the Federation of American Scientists argues that the materials are misleading. “The INDO-PACOM briefing slides make the usual mistake of overselling the threat and under-characterizing the defences,” he writes. “[The] maps suffer from the same lopsided comparison and cherry-picking that handicapped the 2018 Nuclear Posture Review: it overplays the Chinese capabilities and downplays the U.S. capabilities.”<sup>29</sup> It is true that Figure 5 does not give a sense of the contributions to regional security made by US treaty partners, including Australia, Japan, and South Korea. Their elision suggests that continued US strength depends upon the critical difference made by these treaty partners, and that international alliances should therefore be treated with care. Moreover, data comprising the map skews heavily in favour of the (north)western Pacific theatre and the South China Sea, where most assets from both sides are allocated.<sup>30</sup>

### **Assigning Motive and Meaning to China’s Regional Engagement**

With so much high-quality data now widely available, explaining the intentionality behind Chinese activity in PICs has become a key area of focus. A preponderance of these are what I call “material” explanations, since they place their main emphasis on strategic competition in pursuit of the national interest, and the relative advantages and risks associated with certain behaviours in that pursuit. This block of work premises itself on the South Pacific as a locus of geostrategic competition between China and the United States. In this understanding, Chinese aid and investment is typically seen as an effort to offset traditional US hegemony in the region, and the responses from the US and its allies as “re-balancing.”<sup>31</sup> The likelihood of armed conflict is presumed to be low—certainly lower than elsewhere in the Indo-Pacific, but not non-existent.<sup>32</sup> More alarming from an American standpoint, however, is the potential for shifting identities in the region. Back in 2007, “Papa” Ron Crocombe argued in a landmark book that “a spectacular transition is under way in the Pacific Islands” from “overwhelmingly” Western cultural and political influence, to Asian.<sup>33</sup> More than a decade later, there remains a pervasive sense that PICs are vulnerable to jumping ship from the US to China, owing, among other things, to their dependence on foreign investment and the relative scale of Chinese economic activities noted above.<sup>34</sup> At the very least, there is broad recognition of the dilemma faced by small states in the Pacific, including staunch US-allies, brought on by the introduction of China and strategic competition.<sup>35</sup>

This framing of a looming showdown and choosing-up-sides in the Pacific suggests that the region holds significant strategic value for China. There are two main currents of thought as to the orientation of this value. The first centres on the politics of diplomatic recognition for the Republic of China.<sup>36</sup> As of 2020, there are 15 countries that formally recognize the Republic of China as the country's sole legitimate government, and do not recognize the People's Republic.<sup>37</sup> Four of these (Marshall Islands, Nauru, Palau, and Tuvalu) are PICs, with the remainder scattered mostly in the Caribbean and Africa.<sup>38</sup> This perception of threat is only intensified when combined with the historic US influence and its support for Taipei. Viewing any and all support for Taiwan as a threat to the territorial integrity of "One China", Beijing regards the region as an important pillar of ongoing ROC support and, therefore, a valuable chess piece in its international grand strategy.<sup>39</sup>

The second type of material explanation highlights China's resource diplomacy. At the core of this hypothesis is a belief that Chinese interventions abroad are driven by a need to fuel its own domestic and international economic ambitions, and that Chinese aid, investment, and public diplomacy is designed to secure access to vital material inputs. This idea has been especially prominent in studies of China's incursions into other geographic contexts, especially Africa.<sup>40</sup> Some have suggested a similar dynamic may be at work in Pacific Island countries as well.<sup>41</sup> However, Philippa Brant argues that the resource drive hypothesis may be overplayed in the Pacific region, noting that even in relatively resource-rich PICs, it is not clear how or how fully the available resources meet China's development needs, and that explicit references to the need for resources are absent from documents outlining Chinese motivations for aid provision.<sup>42</sup>

To be sure, there is an emergent body of work that also examines the sociological underpinnings of China's global engagement. These include China's desire to overcome a historic sense of national identity rooted in victimhood and humiliation at foreign hands, socialisation effects resulting from China's global integration, and a drive for international prestige through the use of persuasion techniques rather than economic or military superiority.<sup>43</sup> Additionally, China's identification with developing states as partners in a struggle against global imperialism and inequality, termed "South-South cooperation" or "win-win" cooperation in the official parlance of the Chinese government, is of particular relevance in the Pacific, where China seeks to differentiate itself from traditional aid providers.<sup>44</sup> However, none of these sociological explanations are incompatible with the material ones noted above, and some studies incorporate both into a richer understanding of the Chinese "national interest." One prominent recent example is Zhang's *A Cautious New Approach: China's Growing Trilateral Aid Cooperation*, which understands Chinese aid schemes, including in PICs, as driven in equal measure by social and strategic concerns.<sup>45</sup>

## Cold War Thinking and its Consequences

Placing so much emphasis on geostrategy as the motivator for China's ascendance in the Pacific carries a range of consequences. Most importantly, it runs a high risk of creating a tautological echo chamber in which the dangers of China's rise are taken to be self-evident by virtue of the rise itself. The pervasiveness of this view is only encouraged when other approaches and explanations which could lend new perspective on that rise have not been sufficiently examined. Since China's presence in the region is determined by strategic competition, and by definition competitions have winners and losers, wins for China means losses for others. Its rise is therefore disruptive to the status quo, and further evidence is not required.

There are signs of this logic at work in official thinking about China in several western countries. Consider, for example, the information presented above in Figure 5. During a study tour to Camp Smith in December 2019, at which the map was presented and discussed, projections of the numbers of weapons and pieces of hardware are presented as speaking for themselves. Those numbers may well have pinpoint accuracy, but that is not the point. The facts, as discussed by elite-level staff at INDO-PACOM, were that China was developing new and better weapons, deploying them across the Indo-Pacific, and that this threatened the US and its allies. In other words, the build-up on its face was threatening. More missiles meant more missiles, and more submarines more submarines. Chinese military development was not taken as symptomatic of a China threat. Rather, it is the threat, at least by INDO-PACOM's reckoning. No other interpretations or explanations were needed. The same rationale applies to other areas of Chinese involvement in the Pacific too. The Camp Smith briefing referred to China's "pernicious and predatory economics" and "comprehensive coercion" across multiple sectors that in INDO-PACOM's view constituted "the greatest threat to global order and security," and "made the world safe for authoritarianism."<sup>46</sup>

The belief in China's ipso facto threat is reflected in public dialogue more broadly as well. In the US, the common framing of the US-China strategic rivalry has generated much talk of a "new Cold War" with China.<sup>47</sup> This tendency has been enflamed in recent times by statements of Donald Trump and Xi Jinping on a slew of security and trade-related issues, as well as Covid-19.<sup>48</sup> However, the concept of Cold War based on strategic competition with China has been a subject of discussion since at least the mid-1990s, suggesting that the competitive-strategic understanding of China's rise is a pattern of thinking as entrenched as it is influential.<sup>49</sup> In Australia and New Zealand, warnings of multifaceted and insidious Chinese influence throughout the region are growing, as are worries for what China's activities will mean for individual Pacific Island Countries (PICs). As Jonathan Pryke, Director of the Lowy Institute's Pacific Islands Program recently wrote:

Over the last two decades China has been steadily building its influence in the South Pacific. Many perceive this expansion to be growing at a rate much faster than what could be considered a natural reflection of China's growing economic and geopolitical clout. This has left many analysts in the West to ask, what is China's ambition in the South Pacific, and what risks does this create? In the past three years, China's footprint in the South Pacific has become so large, and its behavior in other parts of the world so much more assertive, that alarm bells have started to sound in capital cities of the South Pacific's traditional partners.<sup>50</sup>

For its part, China is both aware of and responsive to these rhetorical turns, and has even signaled the risk of the "China threat" narrative becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy. In November 2020, a leaked document, widely reported in Australian media, accused Prime Minister Scott Morrison of "poisoning" bilateral relations, and trying to "torpedo" Victoria's Belt and Road deal. "If you make China the enemy, China will be the enemy," a consular official told reporters in Canberra.<sup>51</sup>

Elegant and familiar though it may be, frequent and uncritical use of the new Cold war narrative comes with other hazards as well. One of these is that it tends to encroach upon the quest for alternative explanations for China's foreign policy and posture, leaving us with an incomplete picture of the means, motives, and results of these.

For example, very little has yet been written on the domestic determinants of Chinese foreign policy in general, or of its aid, the Belt and Road Initiative, or any other dimension of its Pacific engagement. To some degree, this gap is understandable—conducting primary research in China has always been challenging. The 'black box' nature of decision-making in a post-totalitarian state coupled with the rapidly changing nature of the policy landscape means that access to information about what choices are made, why, how, and by whom is limited. By the time it makes its way through the academic publishing process and trickles down to inform debate in western countries, such details are often hopelessly dated. Moreover, the theoretical tools that would enable an analysis of the domestic elements at play in China's Pacific aid program, for example, were not developed with states like China in mind. "Liberal" theories of international politics are about cooperation among pluralistic social interests and groups—something China was long presumed not to have and for many years did not have.<sup>52</sup> Yet this approach could teach us a great deal about how and why China has made its choices in the Pacific, and restore a sense of nuance and balance to a debate dominated by a focus on geostrategic competition. Not only would we gain a clearer sense of the institutions and actors now at play, but the appearance of the China threat is apt to be greatly reduced if we were to think of the uptick in development assistance, for example, as an effort to encourage a nascent domestic aid industry in China by gaining much-needed experience in micro-cosmic delivery settings, rather than something meant to supplant US influence. Future

studies would do well to explore China's growing global presence, including in PICs, as the outward extension of its own development plan, rather than presuming that Chinese behaviours are effectively handed down to it by geopolitical gamesmanship with the US.

A further and perhaps even more important consequence is that an over-emphasis on geostrategic explanations undermines the search for a better understanding of the differentiated nature of national interests in PICs, and the reasons why the new Chinese presence may be more contentious in some of these than others. The Cold War framing in particular invites us to view the region through the prism of competition among two rival superpowers, with whom PICs—indeed, all smaller states—are expected to bandwagon. This leaves too little room to capture the complexity of national debates being had in PICs over China's involvement, and worse, risks the disenfranchisement of Pacific Islanders by silencing their views on China's rise and any threat (or opportunity) it may pose for them. From the standpoint of US interests, China's aid, investment and militarisation amounts to a "loss" of influence in the Pacific, as if PICs were American possessions which belonged to the United States instead of Islanders themselves. Scholars of Pacific Island politics are well acquainted with this point. As Terence Wesley-Smith and Edgar Porter suggest, Oceania holds a tacit status as an "American lake" in the minds of many, something that takes away the agency and experience of those who live there.<sup>53</sup> Put another way, we ought not to rush to the conclusion that US understandings of threat from China are necessarily shared by Pacific Islanders and their governments, especially when this claim is merely supposed and not based on rigorous research.

In fairness, some attempts have been made to introduce a greater degree of Islander agency to our understanding of China's presence in PICs.<sup>54</sup> Additionally, the task of bringing some much-needed Islander perspectives into the discussion about Chinese influence is already under way. The foundational work in this area is 'Papa' Ron Crocombe's sweeping *Asia in the Pacific Islands: Replacing the West*, which argued that seismic cultural, political, and social shifts are underway in PICs as a result of Chinese influence, and that leaders in PICs must prepare themselves to confront this reality.<sup>55</sup> As such, the book's target audience was Pacific Islander's themselves. Besides the volume released by Wesley-Smith and Porter in 2010, two others have sought to foreground Islander voices in the debate about China—one edited by Michael Powles in 2016, and a forthcoming collection edited by Graeme Smith and Terence Wesley-Smith entitled *The China Alternative: Changing Regional Order in the Pacific Islands*.<sup>56</sup> Collectively, these works highlight some the diversity of view and experiences of China among PICs, and suggest that local and national customs, attitudes and institutions hold the key to understanding variance across the region. Further research could help us understand the particulars of these important mechanisms, and the way they refract Chinese engagement in PICs.

## Conclusion

Up to this point, discussion of China's growing Pacific presence has been dominated by geostrategic thinking, particularly whether, how, or to what extent Chinese engagement is likely to upend conventional balance of power and western influence in the region. By its nature, such realism-inspired thinking gives rise to a competitive framing—more influence for China leaves less for long-standing traditional powers in the region. In both scholarly and policy circles, there is a pervasive feeling that China is therefore a threat to the regional order in terms of its security, its economic prosperity, and possibly even its fidelity to liberal democracy.

The trouble is not that China threat theory is incorrect or that the information marshalled about China's rise in the Pacific is inaccurate or untrue. Indeed, there are few if any organisations as well-placed to assess the state of growing China in the region as INDO-PACOM, just as the Lowy Institute is in the case of Chinese aid and investment. Moreover, to the extent that the China threat framework has trickle-down impact in western countries, it is also encouraging to think that concrete policy thinking is theoretically grounded. Instead, the problem is that the claim of China's threat has been adopted and repeated widely as if it were self-evidently true, without it having been properly vetted against plausible alternative explanations for the growing Pacific presence—alternatives which may be equally or more persuasive and paint a very different picture of (or at least moderate) the level of threat perceived in that rise. Bluntly stated, present claims of threat rest on poor social science, both in terms of inadequate methodology, and in terms of the lack of case studies to back up claims. There has not yet been sufficient opportunity for the claim of threat to be shown to be false. It therefore cannot be taken as credible or convincing.

The central purpose of this article has been to suggest extending and broadening hypothesis testing as a corrective to this imbalance. Two possibilities stand out. When combined with existing geostrategic or “systemic” explanations, these can help to create a more holistic understanding of Chinese behaviour. One avenue for exploration involves looking at the domestic societal and political origins of Chinese foreign policy in the Pacific. Such a perspective might furnish a better and more timely understanding of the changing architecture of China's development assistance, for example. However, it is important not to restrict our understanding of China's Pacific engagement to “supply-side” arguments pertaining to China's motivations, and to round these out by examining “demand-side” factors within and across PICs. These matter because, without them, we risk projecting the interests and perspectives of rival superpowers onto PICs which may not necessarily share them. At a minimum, we ought to work towards disaggregating our understanding of threats, interests and their determinants in ways sensitive to potential for wide cross-national variance.

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- 7 Tony Walker, "Timeline of a Broken Relationship: How China and Australia Went from Chilly to Barely Speaking," *The Conversation*, 9 December 2020. Available at <https://theconversation.com/timeline-of-a-broken-relationship-how-china-and-australia-went-from-chilly-to-barely-speaking-151567>. Natasha Kassam, "Great Expectations: The Unravelling of the Australia-China Relationship," *Brookings*, 20 July 2020. Available at <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/great-expectations-the-unraveling-of-the-australia-china-relationship/>.
- 8 Derek Cheng, "National MP Mark Mitchell Heads to Hong Kong Amid Cooling NZ-China Relations," *New Zealand Herald*, 16 February 2019. Available at <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/national-mp-mark-mitchell-heads-to-hong-kong-amid-cooling-nz-china-relations/7NE2ZY3J3J7NUYMG2VMB-WNDMKQ/>.
- 9 Karl R. Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge* (New York and London: Basic Books, 1963). See also Arthur L. Stinchcombe, *Constructing Social Theories* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968).
- 10 "Huge Increase in Chinese Aid Pledged to Pacific," *The Guardian*, 8 August 2018. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/aug/08/huge-increase-in-chinese-aid-pledged-to-pacific>.
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- 14 Brant, "Chinese Aid in the Pacific," p.164.
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21 Meick, Ker, and Han, “China’s Engagement in the Pacific Islands, p. 10.

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