

# 1. Economic cooperation is now linked to security

Ten years ago, Pacific security thinkers would debate whether Chinese engagement in the Pacific was by default or by design.

The China is hoping will be signed by 10 Pacific nations next week answers that question.

It reveals the ambitious scope of Beijing's strategic intent in the Pacific and demonstrates a coherent desire from to seek to shape the regional order. It may unintentionally reveal Beijing's limitations in the Pacific.

The draft communique contains several substantial proposals, some new and others building on announcements made at the first China-Pacific foreign ministers meeting in October 2021, and is particularly revealing for a number of reasons.

First, the deal comprehensively aligns economic cooperation with security cooperation. This creates a dilemma for Pacific countries seeking economic deals with China – or for those already indebted to China – as they seek to recover from the economic fallout of the pandemic.

It proposes substantial trade and investment initiatives, including a China-Pacific Islands Free Trade Area, which could potentially create friction with the existing regional free trade agreement: the Pacific Agreement on Closer Economic Relations Plus (PACER Plus).

On security, it lends weight to China's recent claim that it is a "security stakeholder" in the Pacific.

It outlines the provision of intermediate and high-level police training for Pacific police forces and seeks to elevate law enforcement cooperation to ministerial levels through holding the inaugural ministerial dialogue on the topic later this year. China is funding the development of the National Police Academy in Samoa which is pitched at becoming a regional training facility.

Of significant national security concern are the proposed agreements on cooperation on data networks, cyber security, smart customs systems. Given China's expertise at mass surveillance, this raises fears about the collection of biodata and surveillance of those living and travelling in the Pacific.

It also includes an invitation to Pacific countries to participate in the Fengyun meteorological satellite system. Fengyun satellites collect and provide strategic weather reconnaissance data for civilian and military purposes – including maritime surveillance. This could potentially undermine existing maritime surveillance mechanisms as well as the newly announced Quad initiated Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness initiative.

The deal also shows that China is seeking to create competing security architecture and mechanisms in the Pacific, which could potentially cut across and undermine the existing regional security architecture – from existing crisis management mechanisms such as the [Pacific Islands Forum](#) Biketawa Declaration to maritime surveillance mechanisms including the newly announced Quad initiated Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness initiative.

## **2. Shift from bilateralism to multilateralism shows China's growing confidence**

Secondly, the deal shows an evolution in how China engages with the

Pacific, shifting from Beijing's preferred bilateral mode of engagement, to multilateralism. This reflects increased confidence on Beijing's part in its relationships with Pacific countries.

The communique's action plan states China will appoint a Special Envoy for Pacific Island Countries Affairs to advance the comprehensive strategic partnership between China and the Pacific; and the aligning of the Belt and Road Initiative with the Pacific Islands Forum's 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent.

Moreover, it commits China to establishing tripartite cooperation arrangements in Pacific countries with third countries and international organisations in order to facilitate development cooperation. This would also allow China to shape development conversations, access, and funding.

### **3. China wants to get into humanitarian and disaster relief**

Following China's response to the Tongan eruption and tsunami earlier this year, this agreement cements China's ambitions to become a humanitarian responder and a key stakeholder in disaster responses in the Pacific.

The communique refers to a decision last year to establish a relief cooperation centre and the Pacific Reserve of Emergency Supplies (in Guangdong) and significantly it refers to establishing a sub-reserve of humanitarian supplies in Pacific countries. This raises questions about what form and scope the prepositioning of supplies would look like. Would it resemble, for example, a warehouse at a wharf in the Solomon Islands?

### **4. China seeks more access to the maritime domain**

The agreement seeks to give greater form to China's strategic interests in and access to the Pacific's maritime domain, including increasing China's access for commercial fishing. For example, China has majority fishing rights in Kiribati and when foreign minister Wang Yi visits Kiribati this week it is widely expected that a series of fisheries deals will be signed.

It was rumoured in 2021 that China influenced the lifting of the Phoenix Islands Protected Area opening it to commercial fishing. The benefits are also strategic reflecting how Chinese fisheries investments are part of a broader strategy to build strategic presence in the Pacific.

## 5. Strategic timing

The timing of this proposal is not coincidental. It is a counter move to the recently announced Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity and the broader commitments by the United States, Australia and New Zealand to the Pacific.

It is also deeply damaging to Pacific regionalism following the highly controversial draft security cooperation agreement [between China and Solomon Islands](#).

It comes at a time when the Pacific Islands Forum – due to meet in July – is experiencing the most significant challenge to its unity. Last year, five Micronesian members withdrew from the forum, which reduced the number of forum countries that recognise Taiwan to two (Tuvalu and Nauru). A weakened forum works in China's favour. But this may also galvanise regional solidarity.

The key question is whether China's vision for the Pacific and its role in it will gain currency in the Pacific. It would mean a significant loss of strategic autonomy for Pacific countries and for that reason it is unlikely Beijing will be

successful. That does not, however, preclude some Pacific states from pursuing bilateral versions of the arrangement. We will soon learn how effective Beijing's diplomacy in the Pacific is. China's diplomats will be looking for some wins during Wang's Pacific tour, but this gambit may reveal the limitations of their influence.

- Dr Anna Powles, a senior lecturer in security studies at Massey University in New Zealand

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