

China launches empire building exercise in Pacific theatre

Exclusive Economic Zone map by citizenship, showing countries visited by Wang Yi. By Cleo Paskal and Pavak Patel.

President Panuelo: 'Chinese control over our security space, aside from impacts on our sovereignty, increases the chances of China getting into conflict with Australia, Japan, US and New Zealand, on the day when Beijing decides to invade Taiwan.'

Time to head to the map room. We'll open the long, wide, top drawer, pull out the map of World War II's Pacific Theatre, and set it aside on the chart table for now. We'll get back to it. But first we'll pull out an exclusive economic zone (EEZ) map of the region.

Under the UN Convention on the [Law](#) of the Sea, every island can get up to 200 nautical miles off its coast as an EEZ in which it controls resources, say, fisheries. That means, for example, Pacific Island Country (PIC) Kiribati may have a population of around 120,000, but, with its EEZ, it covers as much of the planet as India.

Now let's colour in the EEZs of the countries being visited at the moment by China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi and his large delegation. What we see is a large, contiguous band—Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Fiji, Tonga and Samoa—off the northeast coast of Australia, backed against Kiribati. And off to the northwest of Australia, almost embedded into Indonesia, strategically located Timor-Leste.

What are we looking at? Well, China helpfully tells us.

CHINA'S 'VISION' AND 'FIVE-YEAR ACTION PLAN' FOR PACIFIC ISLAND COUNTRIES

Wang is hoping the PICs who recognize China will sign on to two prewritten documents. We know what's in them because they have been leaked by Pacific Islanders worried about the implications.

The first one is "China-Pacific Island Countries Common Development [Vision](#)". The second is "China-Pacific Island Countries Five-Year [Action](#) Plan on Common Development (2022-2026)". The "Action Plan" describes how China plans to achieve its "Vision".

"Vision" talks about: law enforcement cooperation, including "immediate and high-level police training"; "cooperation on network governance and cyber security", including a "shared future in cyberspace"; the "possibility of establishing China-Pacific Island Countries Free Trade Area"; "enhance cooperation in customs, inspections and quarantine"; "create a more friendly policy environment for cooperation between enterprises"; set up Confucius Institutes; train young diplomats; "establish China-Pacific Island Countries Disaster Management Cooperation Mechanism", including prepositioned "China-Pacific Island Countries Reserve of Emergency Supplies", and much more.

"Action Plan" includes: "a Chinese Government Special Envoy for Pacific Island Countries Affairs"; a "China-Pacific Island Countries Ministerial Dialogue on Law Enforcement Capacity and Police Cooperation"; "assistance in laboratory construction used for fingerprints testing, forensic autopsy, drugs, electronic and digital forensics"; "encourage and support airlines to operate air routes and flights between China and Pacific Island Countries"; "Send 200 medical personnel" in the next five years; "2500 government scholarships" from 2022 to 2025, and much more.

Specific PRC Provinces and institutions are mentioned—a method of making sure there is “ownership” within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) system. So, for example, Guangdong Province, long a focal point of PIC engagement, is to send medical teams, arts troupes and provide 60 training opportunities. Tianjin Municipality will offer 20 scholarships.

READING THE MAP

So, what are we looking at? Well, if Beijing has its way, Empire.

Look at the EEZs alone. If China gets its way, the fishing fleets will be sent in, with processing ports set up, including “prepositioning” of various sorts, and loose visa and customs restrictions. We’ve seen China use its fishing fleet for grey zone activity before, and it has an overt doctrine of civil-military fusion. Additionally, the PRC’s 2017 National [Intelligence](#) Law compels Chinese companies to assist in intelligence activities. Then add in the cyber integration, police and diplomatic training.

Those countries don’t have the ability to control Chinese activities in their waters. That arc has the potential to become a “First Island Chain” to hem in and/or interdict Australia and New Zealand.

VIEW FROM THE REGION

So, what do people in the region think? Another document that leaked is a [letter](#) written by President David Panuelo of the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM) to his fellow Pacific leaders. He writes what is being proposed is “the single-most game-changing proposed agreement in the Pacific in any of our lifetimes.”

“The language of these documents is a sign that China has faithfully done its homework, as the choice of words are, on their face and at first glance,

attractive to many of us—perhaps all of us. They speak of democracy and equity and freedom and justice [...] Where the problems arise are in the details, and the details suggest that China is seeking [...] to acquire access and control of our region, with the result being the fracturing of regional peace, security, and stability."

"[The agreement] seeks to ensure Chinese control of 'traditional and non-traditional security' of our islands, including through law enforcement training, supplying, and joint enforcement efforts, which can be used for the protection of Chinese assets and citizens. [It] seeks Chinese control and ownership of our communications and infrastructure, as well as customs and quarantine infrastructure [...] for the purpose of biodata collection and mass surveillance of those residing in, entering, and leaving our islands, ostensibly to occur in part through cybersecurity partnerships."

"I am aware that the bulk of Chinese research vessel activity in the FSM has followed our Nation's fiber optic cable infrastructure, just as I am aware that the proposed language in this agreement opens our countries up to having our phone calls and emails intercepted and overheard."

This level of understanding and openness about China's political warfare threat—and the possibility of it spilling over into kinetic—is exceptional from a national leader. President Panuelo's country does not recognize Taiwan, and yet he wrote: "What we are seeing with the proposed 2nd PRC-PICs Foreign Ministers Meeting and its accompanying outcome documents are an intent to shift those of us with diplomatic relations with China very close into Beijing's orbit, intrinsically tying the whole of our economies and societies to them. The practical impacts, however, of Chinese control over our security space, aside from impacts on our sovereignty, is that it increases the chances of China getting into conflict with Australia, Japan, the United States and New Zealand, on the day when Beijing decides to invade Taiwan."

“To be clear, that’s China’s long-term goal: to take Taiwan. Peacefully, if possible; through war if necessary.”

PACIFIC ISLANDS LEADERSHIP ON CHINESE POLITICAL WARFARE

OK, back to the maps. It shouldn’t be a surprise that President Panuelo sees through China’s “attractive” words. In the last 120 years or so, FSM has been buffeted by the cyclones of empire, moving from being a colony of Spain to Germany to Japan to being part of the only United Nations’ “Security Trusteeship” (under the United States), before finally proclaiming a republic in 1979.

The region is full of leaders, business people, academics, journalist, faith leaders, etc., who understand geopolitics much better than many sitting in think tanks (or foreign ministries) in many Western capitals.

That’s why we’ve seen a solid pushback on China’s ambitions in the region. Soon after Solomon Islands switched from Taiwan to China in 2019, the Provincial government of the country’s most populous province, Malaita, issued the “[Auki](#) Communique”, with the support of traditional chiefs. Among other things, it rejects a “police state” and “strongly resolves to put in place a Moratorium on Business Licenses to new investors connected directly or indirectly with the Chinese Communist Party.”

One of the reasons? They acknowledge “the freedom of religion as a fundamental right and further observes the entrenched Christian faith and belief in God by Malaitan and MOlan peoples and therefore rejects the Chinese Communist Party—CCP and its formal systems based on atheist ideology”.

They also saw through the “attractive” words.

Opposition to the China-Solomon Islands security deal has come from church leaders, [women's](#) groups, provincial leaders and, in a move that put many compliant Western journalists to shame, the Media Association of Solomon Islands [boycotted](#) covering Wang Yi's visit due to restrictions put on their access. They were supported by journalists in [Vanuatu](#).

In Kiribati, opposition leader Tessie Eria Lambourne [said](#), "Since the lockdown there have been exemptions extended to Chinese nationals who have been coming in and going out of our country without restrictions while our seafarers and other nationals had to wait more than three years to be repatriated. [...] Our democratic system, in fact our very sovereignty, is under attack and we need support to ensure our survival as a democratic nation."

Many in the Pacific know exactly what they are looking at. They are looking at the return of the cyclones of Empire.

HOW DID WE GET HERE?

See if this "vision" looks familiar?

"[The goal is] to integrate Pacific countries into the Australian and New Zealand economies and our security institutions". That's from Australia's 2017 Foreign [Policy](#) White Paper.

Or, the "PACER Plus [trade deal] seeks to... preserve New Zealand's position against major competitors from outside of the region in the years to come... Pacific countries will pass the benefits of any future liberalisation and commitments made in Free Trade Agreements concluded with other partners to New Zealand investors and service exporters due to sound most favoured-nation commitments." That's from the New Zealand government's National Interest [Analysis](#) of [PACER Plus](#).

For years, “attractive” words aside, a seeming goal of Australia and New Zealand has been to limit the “messiness” of dealing with close to twenty very different PICs through various attempts at “integration”. That has taken many forms.

The case of Solomon Islands is a microcosm of the dynamic. After the civil war, the warring parties agreed to the Townsville [Peace](#) Agreement (2000), a key element of which was devolution of power to the provinces.

However, the Australian-led RAMSI peacekeeping operation that followed didn’t ensure devolution, perhaps because centralization and seemingly compliant decision-makers appeared to make their job easier. As a result, when they pulled out, Solomons had a tight knot of people in government who knew how to benefit from feeding off outsiders while ignoring/suppressing internal dissent. And China found them very quickly.

This is not a one-off. Australia has just sent a police officer to be the [Tongan](#) Police Commissioner as part of a tied-aid deal, in spite of the fact Tonga ran itself just fine through a volcano, tsunami and pandemic. Now, if Beijing comes in with more aid, how can Australia object if Tongans decide to take a Chinese police officer instead?

WHAT NOW?

So, we know what doesn’t work. What does? How about trusting Pacific Islanders?

In each of these countries many, if not most, of the population doesn’t want closer security ties with China—economic development maybe, but nothing more. The same small group of politicians and business leaders who want to enter into a Faustian pact with China to protect their own bank accounts and security are a threat to their own people and democratic institutions. Locals

know it. They don't want "integration", they want democracy, transparency, accountability and rule of law.

They want Australia to prosecute their corrupt leaders who are using PRC money to buy Australian beach houses. They want international media organizations to hire their journalists to do independent investigations. They want a lot of the things on China's list, like forensics, to be controlled by their own countries. Many of which India is well placed to help with.

The list of suggestions is long, but it all starts with what you think the Pacific should be like in, say, ten years. I would suggest thinking about Iceland.

ICELAND?

Pacific Island Countries are often dismissed as being too small and remote to be viable. But many of the countries are no more remote than Iceland, which has a population of around 350,000. Take a look again at those EEZs. Like many PICs, Iceland has a lot of fish. It has just taken control of its resource and built out its economy from there.

The Faroe Islands (population around 50,000) built up its economy not just on fish but innovations such as passing legislation that requires companies exploring for fossil fuels in its water to provision via a Faroese port, to put money aside for Faroese researchers, and to give Faroese companies equal access to pitch for contracts.

Instead of sending in Australians to be police officers, why not send in Faroese to talk about fishing. Or something. You get the idea.

And for those caught in a haze of South Pacific false memories based on a Broadway musical and think islanders don't work hard, guess who is doing the backbreaking labour keeping Australian and New Zealand agriculture

going—even during the [pandemic](#). And Tonga [claims](#) to have the most PhDs per capita. And the Marshall Islands has more people serving in the US military per capita than almost any US state.

Point is, once you take the countries seriously, a whole new range of options open up—ones people in the region have been talking about for years, if not decades. For example, this is an area subject to natural disasters. Instead of Australia and China vying to be the first to put boots on the ground after a flood, why not help set up national guards in each country, perhaps trained by Pacific Islanders who have served in the US military, who can do the bulk of it themselves.

Using HADR as a strategic toehold is an open secret in defense circles. Helping them build up their own capabilities gives them the sort of strategic autonomy that will come in very helpful if someone tries to take their sovereignty by force—those World War II maps show how hard islanders will fight for their own nations. It also gives a structure for others to “lock in” with if a disaster requires additional assistance.

THE MAP

So, back to the map. China wants to fill it in red. Australia and New Zealand seem to want to fill it in with their own hue of British pink. But what would give the citizens of the Pacific Islands, and the entire Indo-Pacific, the most security, is a mosaic of strong individual colours that come together voluntarily over regional issues but are as economically and politically independent as possible. It's “messier” but, like the democracy that underpins it, it's a “Vision” worth fighting for.

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