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REPORT

Geopolitics at Sea: Strategic Competition in the South Pacific

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AVERTISSEMENT

Geopolitics at Sea: Competition in the South Pacific

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Abstract

The South Pacific has become an increasingly contested geopolitical space as China intensifies its efforts to expand influence beyond the second and third US island defence chains. Through an assertive combination of diplomacy, economic engagement and security cooperation, Beijing seeks to consolidate political alignment among Pacific Island microstates, isolate Taiwan diplomatically and entrench the one-China principle. This strategy has been reinforced by the institutionalisation of China-Pacific ministerial forums, the growing integration of digital and undersea infrastructure projects under the Belt and Road Initiative, and the expansion of security and police cooperation across Melanesia, Micronesia and Polynesia.

In response, traditional regional powers have intensified their engagement. Australia has emerged as a key stakeholder, bolstering diplomatic relations, finalising significant defence agreements with Tuvalu and Papua New Guinea, and increasing investments in regional infrastructure to offset Chinese influence. These efforts align with a broader US strategy of military reinforcement in Micronesia, particularly in Guam, where expanded basing and advanced missile defence systems underpin a renewed deterrence posture. The evolving strategic environment nevertheless raises critical questions regarding sovereignty, regional stability and the durability of the post-1945 security order in the Pacific, particularly in the context of a potential future contingency involving Taiwan.

Résumé

L'espace géopolitique du Pacifique Sud est devenu le théâtre de rivalités croissantes. La Chine intensifie ses efforts pour étendre son influence au-delà des deuxième et troisième chaînes d'îles de défense américaines. Pékin cherche à consolider l'alignement politique des micro-États insulaires du Pacifique afin d'isoler Taïwan sur la scène internationale et d'ancrer le principe d'une seule Chine par une combinaison d'actions diplomatiques, d'engagement économique et de coopération sécuritaire. Cette stratégie s'est renforcée avec l'institutionnalisation de forums ministériels Chine-Pacifique, l'intégration croissante de projets numériques et d'infrastructures sous-marines dans le cadre de l'initiative des Nouvelles Routes de la soie, ainsi que l'élargissement de la coopération policière et sécuritaire en Mélanésie, en Micronésie et en Polynésie.

En réponse, les puissances traditionnelles de la région ont intensifié leur engagement. L'Australie s'est imposée comme un acteur central, en renforçant sa diplomatie régionale, en concluant des accords de défense avec Tuvalu et la Papouasie-Nouvelle-Guinée, et en augmentant ses investissements dans la connectivité régionale afin de contrebalancer l'influence chinoise. Ces initiatives s'inscrivent dans une stratégie américaine plus large de renforcement militaire en Micronésie, en particulier à Guam, où l'extension des capacités de déploiement et la mise en place de systèmes avancés de défense antimissile permettent d'adopter une posture de dissuasion renouvelée. L'évolution de cet environnement stratégique soulève néanmoins des questions majeures quant à la souveraineté, à la stabilité régionale et à la pérennité de l'ordre sécuritaire établi dans le Pacifique Sud depuis 1945, notamment dans l'hypothèse d'une future crise impliquant Taïwan.

Introduction

Long shaped by its insularity and distance from major global trade routes, the South Pacific - comprising predominantly atolls and island states located east of the Australian continent - has progressively emerged as a central geopolitical space. It currently sits at the heart of intensifying Sino-American rivalry and growing strategic tensions between Australia and China. During the Cold War, the strategic value of Pacific Island states remained limited, largely confined to their touristic appeal and their use as sites for nuclear testing. This perception shifted markedly with the emergence of the Indo-Pacific concept, which has become a cornerstone of contemporary international relations following Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's official visit to India in 2007 (Kuo, 2018).

While the United States focused its strategic attention on counterterrorism operations in Afghanistan and Iraq in the aftermath of the 11 September 2001 attacks, Beijing initiated a deliberate and methodical strategy of regional expansion. Although more than 5,500 kilometres separate China from the Pacific Islands, communities originating from the Pearl River Delta have been present in the region since the early nineteenth century, with migration intensifying during the second half of that century (D'Arcy, 2014). Despite the high-profile announcement by US President Barack Obama in 2011 of the deployment of 2,500 Marines to Australia - intended to symbolise Washington's strategic pivot towards the region - the outbreak of the Ukraine crisis in 2014 and the rise of the Islamic State in the Middle East constrained sustained American engagement.

These concurrent areas of geographic tension continued to constrain the depth and consistency of US engagement in the Indo-Pacific during the first term of President Donald Trump and through Joe Biden's presidency. In his second term, President Trump initially sought to reduce US commitments in Western Asia and Europe through diplomacy; however, developments with Iran significantly reinforced US forces in the Middle East at the expense of greater engagement in the Indo-Pacific.

Since Xi Jinping's appointment as General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), China has established itself as a leading actor in regional development financing, diplomacy, and the construction of critical infrastructure, including ports, airports, and

telecommunications networks. Australia, the largest economy in Oceania, increasingly fears that the regional geopolitical balance is shifting and that its traditional influence is waning.

Diplomatic Dynamics

China's Diplomatic Expansion

While China has had a presence in the South Pacific dating back to the imperial period, its expanding diplomatic engagement in the region now forms part of a broader national security strategy. This approach primarily aims to protect Chinese communities from the risks of civil unrest, such as the disturbances that occurred in the Solomon Islands in November 2021, while also strengthening China's diplomatic presence in support of its Taiwan policy.

Since the proclamation of the People's Republic of China (PRC), the CCP has repeatedly asserted its claim to sovereignty over Taiwan. This occurred alongside the retreat of the Kuomintang, led by Chiang Kai-shek, who established the government of the Republic of China (ROC) on the island. With a population of around 23 million, Taiwan is widely regarded as the homeland of the Austronesian peoples, whose descendants migrated to the Micronesian and Polynesian archipelagos between 4000 and 2500 BCE. Indigenous Taiwanese people are consequently considered the distant ancestors of many South Pacific communities.

While the Melanesian and Polynesian subregions have largely recognised the One China Policy, Micronesia has remained predominantly under American influence since the signing of the Compact of Free Association (COFA) in 1965. Located in the north-western Pacific, Micronesia hosts the largest concentration of states that officially recognise Taiwan, notably the Marshall Islands and Palau. Their integration within the US geopolitical sphere constitutes a key pillar of American hegemony in the Indo-Pacific. The Compact grants US forces permanent, unrestricted, and exclusive military access to land, waterways, and airspace (Tupuola, 2025). Tuvalu, conversely, has maintained close ties with Washington since the signing of the Treaty of Friendship in 1979, remaining the sole Polynesian microstate to recognise Taiwan. Collectively, these three archipelagos account for around a quarter of Taiwan's remaining global supporters (Parevliet, 2024).

These island states face increasing exposure to China's hybrid warfare tactics, including cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns, economic coercion, and the exploitation of limited resources through corrupt local elites. The CCP seeks to operate below the threshold of open conflict by exploiting strategic ambiguity to minimise the risk of international retaliation. As part of its broader pressure campaign, China has also accelerated its maritime activities, notably by deploying fishing fleets and unmanned systems within the exclusive economic zones (EEZs) of Pacific Island states (Kit, 2025).

Palau, an archipelago comprising more than 300 islands, offers a clear illustration of these hybrid operations. In March 2024, a cyberattack attributed to Chinese actors compromised government systems, resulting in the theft of 20,000 documents and causing damages estimated at USD 1.2 billion (Judah, 2024). Concurrently, tourism restrictions imposed after Beijing discouraged its citizens from visiting Palau in 2017, following its move away from the One China policy, reduced the percentage of Chinese tourists from 60 per cent to 30 per cent, significantly diminishing the country's GDP (Graham-McClay, 2024).

Chinese-linked entities have leased approximately 380,000 square metres of land near US military facilities and made illicit financial contributions to Palauan officials. This includes a USD 20,000 donation to former President Thomas Remengesau Jr, which was later deemed illegal by the country's anti-corruption prosecutor (Reuters, 2025). The current president, Surangel Whipps Jr, reportedly became the target of diplomatic coercion by the Chinese ambassador to the Federated States of Micronesia, who allegedly promised an annual influx of one million Chinese tourists in exchange for severing diplomatic ties with Taiwan (Reuters, 2025).

As part of its diplomatic consolidation strategy, Beijing has also sought to institutionalise its influence in the South Pacific by convening regular ministerial meetings with Pacific Island states to normalise its presence and structure its geopolitical priorities. This effort has intensified over the past three years, particularly through the annual meeting of Chinese and Pacific Island foreign ministers (Song, 2021). At the most recent summit, held in Beijing on 28-29 May 2025, participants adopted a joint declaration affirming a stronger position on Taiwan than in previous editions (Paik & Augé, 2025). The declaration explicitly affirmed the island's "absolute status" and the CCP government's sole legitimacy (Paik & Augé, 2025).

The composition of attendees marked a notable feature of the meeting. While Australia and New Zealand - the two major powers within the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) - as well as the microstates recognising Taiwan, did not attend, all other PIF member states participated (Ministry of Foreign Affairs People's Republic of China, 2025). This summit also marked the first Pacific foreign ministers' meeting to include Nauru, which adopted the One China policy in 2024 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs People's Republic of China, 2025).

The timing of the meeting, only months after the US withdrew from the Paris Climate Agreement, suspended regional foreign aid, and imposed global tariffs, including on Pacific Island states, provided China with an opportunity to consolidate its diplomatic footprint and showcase its commitment to combating climate change, a core national security concern for Pacific countries. The summit announced several measures, including USD 2 million dedicated directly to climate action and 100 direct investment projects (Reuters, 2025).

Local media outlets published more than 30 articles covering the meeting. These publications, funded by China Global Television Network (CGTN), a state media organisation under the authority of the CCP's Propaganda Department, accounted for nearly one-third of all articles published (Johnson & Young, 2025). While local media historically benefited from substantial US financial support, Chinese state engagement has intensified markedly over the past two decades to strengthen Beijing's ideological and geopolitical narrative in countries adhering to the One China policy (Ahearn, 2022).

Australia's Diplomatic Rebalancing

Since the announcement on 19 April 2022 of a security agreement between China and the Solomon Islands permitting the deployment of Chinese police or military forces (Birtles, Dziedzic, Wasuka, 2022), Canberra has demonstrated renewed and significant interest in strengthening its regional diplomatic presence. This rebalancing act has been facilitated by a change in federal government, with Prime Minister Anthony Albanese advocating greater executive focus on diplomacy, including climate-related issues.

His predecessor, Scott Morrison, declined to attend the 2018 PIF Leaders' Meeting in Nauru, delegating representation to Foreign Minister Marise Payne (SBS News, 2018). At the 2019 PIF meeting in Tuvalu, Morrison adopted a confrontational stance and sought to dilute

references to climate change in the joint communiqué, provoking strong criticism from several leaders, including Fiji's Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama, despite otherwise robust bilateral relations with Australia (Lyons, 2019).

Since Albanese assumed office in May 2022, Pacific leaders have expressed cautious optimism regarding a more responsive Australian diplomatic posture. Immediately following the election, Foreign Minister Penny Wong intensified diplomatic engagement with regional counterparts and island leaders to reaffirm Australia's commitment to addressing their economic, political, and security priorities (Hurst & Murphy, 2022).

Under Albanese's leadership, Australia has concluded two major bilateral treaties with PIF states. In November 2023, on the margins of the PIF Leaders' Summit, Australia signed the "Falepili Union" treaty with Tuvalu (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade). The agreement provides mobility pathways for Tuvaluan citizens to Australia and commits Canberra to disaster assistance (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade). In return, Australia secures veto power over Tuvalu's defence and security partnerships (Graham & Schrimpton, 2023). Strategically located in Western Polynesia, Tuvalu covers an area of around 26 square kilometres.

More historically significant was the conclusion of Australia's second mutual defence treaty in over 70 years in October 2025, following the 1951 ANZUS Treaty. Known as the Pukpuk Treaty, signed by Prime Ministers Albanese and James Marape, the agreement elevates bilateral defence relations to alliance status (Dziedzic, 2025). It stipulates that an armed attack against one party constitutes an attack against both, mirroring NATO's Article 5, and grants Australia unrestricted access to Papua New Guinea in the event of a major regional security threat (Dziedzic, 2025).

This treaty marks a notable shift in Papua New Guinea's foreign policy. Since independence in 1975, Port Moresby has adhered to the principle of "friends to all and enemies to none", particularly in the security domain. Formalising a defence alliance with a neighbouring state therefore represents a significant departure from longstanding diplomatic practice, and establishes Papua New Guinea as the first country in the region to formalise a defence alliance with a neighbouring state.

The treaty also reflects the deepening of defence cooperation following the bilateral security agreement concluded in 2023. It provides for the exchange of sensitive information, the modernisation of military infrastructure, and enhanced coordination in crisis response

(Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2025). By strengthening defence ties with Port Moresby, Canberra seeks to deter China from positioning military assets within striking distance of Australian territory, including areas near the Torres Strait.

These diplomatic efforts come at a time when China is playing an increasingly prominent role in supporting the sovereign security interests of countries across the Pacific. This includes deploying police forces in Fiji, Kiribati, the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, as well as providing military equipment to several regional forces (Bayoumi, 2025). Beijing's ambassador to Papua New Guinea, Yang Xiaoguang, quickly expressed China's reservations regarding the treaty, warning against the emergence of zero-sum regional competition and the development of exclusive security arrangements (Read, 2025).

While the Pukpuk Treaty formalises a closer strategic and operational partnership between the Australian and the Papua New Guinea defence forces, it represents the culmination of a relationship long characterised by close cooperation. Much of the equipment used by Papua New Guinea's navy and air force originates from donations by Australia, which also provides extensive training for Papua New Guinea's armed forces and regularly supports humanitarian and security operations across the country (Australian High Commission Papua New Guinea). Canberra's approach to its northern frontier also includes a strong development component. Australian official development assistance to Papua New Guinea reached approximately AUD 637 million for the 2024-2025 period, making it the largest recipient of Australian aid (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade).

In the same vein, Australia has pursued negotiations with Vanuatu for a new security arrangement, the Nakamal Security Agreement (Lam, 2025). Although the agreement was signed in August 2025, it has not yet been ratified. It aims to strengthen maritime cooperation by conducting joint surveillance of Vanuatu's EEZs, increasing security exercises and sharing information on fisheries and maritime traffic. The agreement also includes targeted economic assistance, with funding allocated to port infrastructure, law enforcement training and crisis response capacity building. Ratification has nevertheless been delayed due to domestic reservations in Vanuatu, where concerns persist that enhanced security cooperation could undermine national sovereignty (Malsungai, 2025). The archipelago has historically adhered to a diplomatic tradition of non-alignment and strategic neutrality since securing independence in 1980.

Infrastructure & Connectivity

China's Belt & Road Initiative: Extending Influence Beyond Eurasia

Initially, China considered the geopolitical project of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as a framework to connect China with Russia, Southeast Asia, the Indian subcontinent, the Middle East and Europe, while also linking southern China to the Mediterranean through maritime routes via the eastern African coastline. The initiative, however, rapidly expanded beyond these original corridors to include countries geographically distant from the historic Silk Roads, including several Pacific Island states.

Following the release of the document *Vision and Actions on Jointly Building the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road* on 28 March 2015 by China's National Development and Reform Commission, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Commerce, the Pacific Ocean was formally integrated into the BRI framework (Ministry of Foreign Affairs People's Republic of China, 2025). Shortly thereafter, a further publication entitled *Belt and Road: Concept and Vision for Maritime Cooperation* underscored Beijing's intention to develop a "blue economic corridor" linking China to the Pacific Islands through maritime routes across the South China Sea (The State Council People's Republic of China, 2017).

Currently, eleven Pacific Island states have joined China's geo-economic initiative. The most recent is Nauru, which acceded to the BRI in March 2024, only three months after restoring diplomatic relations with China in January of the same year (Ministry of Foreign Affairs People's Republic of China, 2024). As with previous signatories, this Micronesian state formalised its participation by signing a Memorandum of Understanding with Beijing (Wallis & Tubilewicz, 2024).

Nauru's decision is likely to exacerbate the sense of isolation experienced by Taiwan's remaining diplomatic partners in the region. As the Marshall Islands and Palau primarily rely on US economic assistance, they have also been affected by reductions in development aid linked to programmes run by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), with critical funding being scaled back (Kirby, 2025). The Palau Red Cross, for instance, has reportedly lost almost USD 600,000 in humanitarian aid (Island Times, 2025).

Through BRI participation, Pacific Island economies seek to attract Chinese investment and generate employment, particularly for younger populations (Ligaiula, 2022). Chinese-led infrastructure and resource development projects - encompassing roads, ports, parliamentary complexes and sports stadiums - enable microstates to address chronic investment shortfalls (Dr. Bo, 2024).

Port infrastructure constitutes a central priority for Beijing. Kiribati, in particular, occupies a strategically significant position that could enable China to establish a key transit hub towards South American markets (Fuji-Takamoto, 2022). Located at the intersection of US spheres of influence - Hawaii and the Palmyra, Jarvis, Howland and Baker atolls - and French Polynesia, this former British protectorate recently concluded an agreement with a subsidiary of the China Mechanical and Engineering Corporation Group to design a marina off its coast (Zabate, 2025). The CCP also seeks to expand its logistical, and potentially military presence through the renovation of Canton Island's former airfield (Makichuk, 2021). Effective control of this facility would enhance China's capacity to monitor US naval and air movements across the central Pacific.

BRI membership grants microstates preferential access to loans from Chinese banks and Beijing-backed financial institutions, notably the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). China Railway First Group, a state-owned company supported by the AIIB, has contributed to social housing construction in Fiji and previously upgraded sections of the national road network (Yee, 2022). These projects rely predominantly on loans rather than grants (Yee, 2022). In 2019, 97 per cent of official Chinese loans carried relatively low interest rates of around 2 per cent, with maturities extending up to 20 years (International Monetary Fund Asia and Pacific Department, 2019). For Pacific states, Chinese financing represents a crucial alternative to conventional multilateral mechanisms, which are often perceived as slow and encumbered by stringent conditionality (Bozzato, 2025).

This growing reliance on external financing nonetheless heightens financial vulnerability and fuels concerns over so-called "debt-trap diplomacy" (O'Keefe, 2018). Such risks stem primarily from the region's unfavourable economic geography: isolation from major global economic hubs, internal territorial fragmentation, limited structural indicators such as population size and GDP, dependence on narrow and volatile revenue sources, and acute exposure to natural disasters and climate change (Rajah, Dayant & Pyke, 2019).

Recent data underscore these vulnerabilities. In 2023, public debt stood at 35.4 per cent of GDP in Samoa (Samoa Public Debt, 2023), 43.3 per cent in Tonga (Countryeconomy.com, 2023), and 83.3 per cent in Fiji (Countryeconomy.com, 2023). More broadly, Pacific Island states participating in the BRI were expected to settle USD 22 billion of debt to China in 2025 (Duke, 2025). Concurrently, in 2024, Beijing supplied labour and materials to Polynesian and Melanesian states in support of major projects, including the USD 9 billion expansion of Faleolo International Airport in Samoa (Sanerivi, 2024) and a USD 71 million, 10,000-seat stadium in the Solomon Islands (Jie, 2023). Situated near key maritime routes and only 1,500 km from Australia's east coast, the Solomon Islands offer China a substantial geopolitical advantage. Awarding a multi-million-dollar contract to a Chinese state-owned enterprise for the redevelopment of Honiara's international port could ultimately advance Beijing's commercial and military objectives (Hurst, 2023).

Subsea Connectivity and Digital Infrastructure Competition

Subsea infrastructure, particularly fibre-optic cables, has become essential for modern economic security and global communications. These cables span the world's oceans, with more than 600 of them transmitting over 95 per cent of international data flows, including internet traffic, financial transactions and government communications (Runde, Murphy & Bryja, 2024).

For the geographically isolated Pacific Islands, such connectivity is of particular importance. International bandwidth enables the digitalisation of key sectors, including industry, education, and healthcare. It also sustains continuous virtual links with the rest of the world at a time when satellite systems may be subject to intermittent disruption. Recent data illustrates Oceania's dense interconnectivity, particularly its status as one of the world's three primary data transmission corridors (Morel, 2022).

Effective communications infrastructure is at the heart of the strategic competition between China and the region's traditional powers. Although Beijing has increased its investment significantly, operating 16 active cables in the Pacific (TeleGeography), these networks are still mainly focused on existing intra-Asian routes. Only two cables currently connect China directly to an Oceanian state: the Sea-Me-We 3 cable linking China to Australia via Southeast Asia, and the Asia-America Gateway (AAG), operational since 2009, which connects the US to China and Southeast Asia through Guam (Morel, 2022). Of the 25 cables crossing Oceania,

13 belong to the European firm Alcatel Submarine Networks and seven to the US company SubCom (Cannon, 2025).

Although Chinese industrial involvement, including that of Huawei Marine Networks, remains limited for now, Beijing's ambitions, both industrial and political, are evident. Since 2022, this interest has re-emerged through proposed agreements with island states that include a digital component in which subsea cables feature explicitly or implicitly. This dynamic is illustrated by the China-Solomon Islands security agreement, which materialised in May 2022 through a Memorandum of Understanding on strengthening cooperation in the blue economy (Hammond, 2023). While the final text remains unpublished, an earlier draft explicitly referenced joint investment in subsea cable construction (Morel, 2022).

Australia and its partners express acute concern over China's expanding strategic ambitions. Chinese investments in physical infrastructure often coincide with software-related initiatives, including digital platforms, operating systems and information governance frameworks. Control over subsea cables confers a significant strategic advantage, enabling potential data interception or the disruption of communications during diplomatic crises or armed conflict (Runde, Murphy & Bryja, 2024). History illustrates the importance of such infrastructure: at the outbreak of the First World War, Britain swiftly converted its commercial telegraph cable network into a military asset by severing much of Germany's global communications.

In response to China's growing influence and to secure regional communications networks, traditional partners have intensified their engagement. In late 2023, the Australian government announced a joint project with the Biden administration, Google, and the Australian digital infrastructure firm Vocus to implement the AUD 80 million South Pacific Connect initiative (Hendry, 2023). More recently, in August 2024, Fiji became the first country in the region to announce the construction of a Google data centre alongside four new subsea cable connections (Yadav, 2024).

Military Dynamics

China's Tasman Sea Naval Projection

Long conceived of as a continental power under Mao Zedong, Beijing's naval ambitions expanded under Deng Xiaoping and, more decisively, under Xi Jinping. This ambition seeks to rectify what Chinese strategists regard as the strategic failures of the nineteenth-century "Century of Humiliation", during which China lost both territory and prestige to foreign, primarily European powers (Lei, 2017). Without a credible blue-water navy, imperial China proved ill-prepared for maritime sieges along its coastline, beginning with the First Opium War (1839-1842), which resulted in the cession of Hong Kong to the British Empire. The Qing dynasty subsequently endured two major naval defeats, first against France (1884-1885) and then against Japan (1894-1895) (Lei 2017).

China now operates the world's largest military fleet, fielding approximately 234 advanced warships, compared with 219 for the United States Navy (Palmer, Carroll & Velazquez, 2024). Projections indicate that this figure could exceed 400 vessels by 2030, compared with an estimated 300 for the US Navy (Palmer, Carroll & Velazquez, 2024). Beijing pursues three core objectives through this expansion: defending its borders, asserting maritime sovereignty claims, and strengthening maritime security. To protect its maritime approaches, China has invested heavily in building destroyers, cruisers, frigates and nuclear-powered submarines. This has enabled it to extend its naval presence from the mainland towards the second and potentially the third island chain (Salisbury, 2024).

Its ability to project naval power into the far reaches of the Indo-Pacific was demonstrated in February 2025, when a task force comprising a Renhai-class Type 055 guided-missile cruiser, a Jiangkai-class Type 054 frigate, and an at-sea replenishment vessel partially circumnavigated Australia, before conducting live-fire exercises in the Tasman Sea (Wong & Atkinson, 2025). The exercise aimed to signal the Chinese Navy's capacity to intervene during a crisis or conflict, including the ability to conduct long-range missile strikes against Australian naval assets at sea or in port (Parker, 2025). This show of force followed China's first ballistic missile test in the Pacific Ocean since 1980, conducted in September 2024 (Gan, 2024).

In December 2024, the United States Department of Defence announced that China plans to construct additional replenishment vessels to sustain prolonged deployments of combat ships

(US Department of Defense, 2024). Current figures show that the Chinese Navy operates twelve replenishment ships capable of long-range, extended missions, compared with fifteen for the US Navy, which also benefits from access to allied ports (Dr Bhardwaj, 2025). The construction of additional support vessels has become a strategic priority for Beijing, given the limited nature of its overseas logistics infrastructure, including in the Pacific Islands (Dr. Bhardwaj, 2025). While China maintains a regular military presence at the Ream naval base in Cambodia, on the Gulf of Thailand, its diplomatic efforts have nonetheless encountered setbacks, most notably its failure in May 2022 to secure a regional security agreement with eight Pacific Island states that would have expanded its regional military influence (Deutsche Welle, 2022).

The CCP has unveiled its third aircraft carrier, the Fujian, in an effort to bolster its air and sea power projection capabilities, which closely resembles the US Navy's Gerald R. Ford supercarrier (Shepherd & Valino, 2025). This technological leap means the Fujian is equipped with three electromagnetic catapults, enabling it to launch heavier aircraft at a significantly higher tempo. Compared with China's second carrier, the Shandong, which entered service in 2019, the Fujian can carry a substantially larger air wing of around 60 aircraft, as opposed to 44. This greatly extends China's air reach across the Pacific (Lariosa, 2025). Chinese military experts claim that Fujian's three catapults can generate up to 300 sorties per day (Zheng, 2025), which would significantly enhance China's blue-water combat capabilities.

US Strategic Posture and Operational Constraints in the Western Pacific

During the first year of President Trump's second term, the Pentagon moved to rapidly expand its military presence, with the United States Navy establishing a sustained presence across Micronesia's microstates and island territories. In March 2025, US Secretary of Defence Pete Hegseth selected Guam as the destination of his first regional visit, a decision that underscored the territory's central role in the United States' deterrence strategy (Cagurangan, 2025). Since its liberation from Japanese occupation in the summer of 1944, Guam has become one of the most heavily militarised islands in the world, hosting 52 military installations, including nuclear submarine facilities and bases for B-1 and B-2 stealth bombers, covering 28 per cent of the island's land area (Fong & Roy, 2024).

A total of around 7,000 permanent United States military personnel are stationed on Guam, including 3,260 Navy personnel and 1,800 Air Force personnel, as well as several thousand family members (SBS News, 2017). This concentration aims to ensure that any strategic attack would impose prohibitively high costs on potential adversaries. North Korean leader Kim Jong-un has previously threatened to strike Guam (BBC, 2017), while in September 2020 the Chinese Air Force released a video on its Weibo account depicting nuclear-capable bombers simulating an attack on a base closely resembling Andersen Air Force Base (Walsh, 2020). As a hub for power projection and deterrence in the wider Indo-Pacific, the Trump administration plans to advance the development of enhanced integrated air and missile defence systems for the island (Toves, 2025).

The Pentagon is concurrently planning to bolster its military presence in Palau. The US military is set to modernise Malakal Port, the country's main harbour, to enable US naval vessels to refuel, resupply, and eventually rearm (Island Times, 2025). Approximately 65 km south of Malakal, the Pentagon has invested USD 100 million over the past two years to develop 40 hectares on Angaur Island to host the receiver of the TACMOR multi-mission over-the-horizon radar system (Miller, Li & Xu, 2025). This capability will strengthen US deterrence in the Western Pacific, particularly by enhancing detection of Chinese hypersonic missiles and aircraft that could threaten US forces in a Taiwan-related contingency. Moreover, the Pentagon has reinforced the US military presence across the Northern Mariana Islands, particularly on Tinian Island, by upgrading military facilities, including new runways to support US Air Force operations in the Second Island Chain (Indo-Pacific Defense Forum, 2025).

The perpetual deployment of US military forces in Western Asia, tying up critical military assets and drawing political attention to the region, carries the risk of compromising the US Defence Department's planned endeavours in Micronesia. At the start of Trump's second term, two aircraft carriers were deployed to the Middle East as the US launched air and naval strikes against the Houthis in Operation Rough Rider. During Operation Midnight Hammer, which targeted Iranian nuclear facilities, the Pentagon deployed a significant naval and air presence, most notably B-2 Spirit bombers dropping GBU-57A/B Massive Ordnance Penetrators - marking their first operational use. Several American aircraft were shot down or crashed during Operation Epic Fury, including 10 Reaper drones, three F-15s, one F-35 and six KC-135 tankers (Mitchell, 2026). The USS Gerald R. Ford aircraft carrier has been damaged and hundreds of precision weapons, such as advanced air defence interceptors (Patriot and THAAD rounds) and Tomahawk cruise missiles, have been depleted (Mitchell, 2026; Robertson, 2026).

During the first 100 hours of Operation Epic Fury, the US reportedly used 168 Tomahawk missiles and fired more than 800 during the first month of the war, despite having procured only 322 in the previous five years (Hauslohner, Chávez, Fedor & Politi, 2026; Lamothe, Copp and Robertson, 2026); lawmakers have stated that it will take years to replace them. Tomahawks are coveted partly because they can travel over 1,609 km, reducing the need to send American pilots into high-risk airspace. Depleted munitions present one of the most significant long-term effects of the conflict, especially given prior reductions following US aid to Ukraine. Should a crisis in the Indo-Pacific, particularly over Taiwan, arise in the near to medium term, the US may struggle to project sustained force across the First Island Chain.

France's Multilateral "Third Way" Strategy

Against this backdrop of intensifying confrontation, France's Indo-Pacific strategy positions itself as a multilateral "third way", rejecting rigid bloc logic while acknowledging China's rise. Rather than adopting an overtly antagonistic posture, Paris recognises that regional strategic reconfiguration could affect its status as a resident power. France's legitimacy in the South Pacific derives from its sovereignty over three overseas territories in Melanesia and Polynesia: New Caledonia, Wallis and Futuna, and French Polynesia. Despite their geographical distance from metropolitan France, these territories confer distinct strategic weight on Paris within the UN Security Council and the European Union, where France has framed its overseas territories as strategic EU assets.

These territories occupy key niches within the South Pacific economy, attracting the interest of external powers. New Caledonia's prosperity rests on its nickel industry, a resource critical to electric vehicle batteries and defence applications such as missiles and armoured vehicles. Holding approximately 25 per cent of global nickel reserves, it ranks as the world's third-largest producer (Lyengar, 2024). French Polynesia, located at the antipode of Hawaii, encompasses some of the Pacific's most biodiverse waters, home to over 1,000 fish species and 176 coral species (Radio France Internationale, 2025). Wallis and Futuna, situated between Fiji and Samoa, is considered to possess strategic metals such as cobalt, essential for both military applications - missile guidance and radar systems - and industrial uses (Bachelier & Pajon, 2023).

These economic and military assets have heightened China's interest in expanding its influence over French overseas territories. Chinese foreign interference activities reportedly focus on cultivating political and economic elites, particularly in New Caledonia and French Polynesia, with the aim of drawing them into the BRI (Eudeline & Hung, 2022). Associations such as the Sino-Caledonian Friendship Association and the Pacific-China Friendship Association in French Polynesia purportedly maintain links with the CCP's United Front networks (Eudeline & Hung, 2022).

Although the announcement of AUKUS and the subsequent cancellation of Australia's submarine programme temporarily constrained France's regional ambitions, these developments also reinforced its profile as an autonomous strategic actor. Despite longstanding criticism linked to its colonial past, nuclear testing, and the Rainbow Warrior incident, France restored and deepened its regional ties under President François Hollande, notably through the admission of New Caledonia and French Polynesia into the PIF in 2016. Neighbours such as Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea have acknowledged the quality of France's engagement in Melanesia. During visits to Port Vila and Port Moresby in July 2023, President Emmanuel Macron became the first French head of state to visit Pacific Island states.

The Armed Forces of New Caledonia (FANC), numbering around 3,000 personnel, form the backbone of France's regional posture (Bachelier & Pajon, 2023). Their missions include medical evacuation, search and rescue, disaster response, and environmental protection. Alongside the 3,000 personnel stationed in French Polynesia, some 4,000 km away, French forces regularly conduct joint exercises with regional allies and partners, both at sea and in the air (Abensour, 2025). These include exercises such as La Pérouse, Varuna and Pitch Black, as well as operations with the United States and Japan. US support for Operation Marianne notably enabled the deployment of a French nuclear-powered attack submarine near Guam in late 2020 and early 2021.

The growing frequency of these operations across the Pacific Rim enhances interoperability with regional partners and contributes to freedom of navigation and strategic stability. This effort also includes Exercise Croix du Sud, a biennial post-disaster exercise led by the Armed Forces in New Caledonia, bringing together resident powers to test collective humanitarian response capabilities (Mannevy, 2025).

Large-scale bilateral manoeuvres between France and Australia have also resumed, particularly between units of the Pacific Marine Infantry Regiment-New Caledonia (RIMaP-

NC) and the Australian Army in Queensland since March 2023. Personnel numbers across land, naval and air components are set to increase under the August 2023 Military Programming Law, which provides for an additional 200 troops on top of the existing 1,500, alongside EUR 150 million in investment in next-generation equipment (Gras, 2023).

While New Caledonia remains central to France's regional engagement, the polarisation of local politics between independence and loyalist camps continues to generate persistent tensions. In 2021, a report commissioned by the Kanak and Socialist National Liberation Front (FLNKS) proposed transforming the territory into a "Djibouti of the Pacific" by generating revenue through the leasing of military bases to China and other interested states (Brady, 2024). Marked by ethnic and geographical divides, this cleavage opposes the Kanak-majority Northern and Loyalty Islands provinces - favouring independence - to the Southern Province and Greater Nouméa, which remain opposed. This divide illustrates the complexity of local geopolitics in which competing visions of sovereignty and institutional future coexist within the same territory.

Although the three self-determination referendums held in 2018, 2020 and 2021 resulted in loyalist victories, political tensions have since intensified. A proposed reform of the electoral roll for the 2024 provincial elections, supported by non-independence groups, raised deep concerns among Kanak communities and triggered violent unrest that claimed fourteen lives and plunged the archipelago into an unprecedented economic crisis (Les Décodeurs, 2024). The reform sought to enfranchise citizens born in the territory or resident for at least ten years (Gabel, 2024).

While France's Constitutional Council has since frozen the reform, Paris is working to establish a new relationship with New Caledonia under the Bougival Agreement, signed on 12 July 2025 by state representatives and both independence and loyalist delegates. The agreement envisages expanded sovereign competences, including participation in regional and international organisations, while maintaining an associated status with France, similar to New Zealand's arrangements with the Cook Islands and Niue (Guibert, 2025). Although the FLNKS has expressed reservations, the project of self-determination for New Caledonia has gained further definition with the signing of the Élysée-Oudinot Agreement (Wyeth, 2026).

Should this project receive constitutional validation, New Caledonia would be able to conclude certain international agreements and obtain external recognition within a framework of shared sovereignty, an arrangement unlikely to prove frictionless. The recent discord

between the New Zealand Government and Mark Brown, the Prime Minister of the Cook Islands, regarding the endorsement of a collaborative agreement with China concerning seabed mining initiatives favourable to Chinese interests exemplifies the complexities inherent in such agreements. Large-scale protests organised by opposition parties followed in Avarua, emphasising public apprehensions regarding sovereignty and maintaining close relations with New Zealand (Muzaffar, 2025).

Conclusion

The South Pacific is experiencing a pronounced intensification of geopolitical rivalry, driven primarily by Beijing's efforts to construct a sphere of influence beyond the second and third US island defence chains. The CCP is mobilising its diplomatic apparatus and major state-linked enterprises to align the microstates of Micronesia, Melanesia and Polynesia with its strategic objectives, with the dual aim of diplomatically isolating Taiwan and entrenching the One China principle.

As part of this consolidation strategy, Beijing is also seeking to institutionalise its regional presence by convening regular ministerial-level meetings with Pacific Island states, thereby normalising its influence and formalising its geopolitical priorities. This momentum has accelerated over the past three years, notably through the annual China-Pacific Island Countries Foreign Ministers' Forum. At the May 2025 summit in Beijing, a joint declaration was adopted that took a firmer stance on Taiwan than previous declarations.

Despite the intensification of Chinese pressure, the Pacific remains a distinctive strategic space, still accounting for 25 per cent of Taiwan's remaining diplomatic partners. While the diplomatic defections of the Solomon Islands and Kiribati in 2019, followed by Nauru in 2024, underscore the effectiveness of China's influence strategy, Micronesia remains broadly anchored within the US orbit, particularly through the Marshall Islands and Palau. Tuvalu, meanwhile, remains the last Polynesian state to recognise Taipei. These microstates are, however, increasingly exposed to a growing form of Chinese hybrid warfare, combining cyber operations, disinformation campaigns, economic coercion and the co-option of local elites to exploit limited national resources.

This pressure unfolds against the backdrop of the expanding role of the BRI in aligning China's geopolitical interests with regional economic development. Undersea infrastructure construction occupies a central position within this strategy, designed to enhance regional connectivity. While only two undersea cables currently link mainland China to the South Pacific, Beijing has sought since 2022 to incorporate a digital dimension into its bilateral agreements, with particular emphasis on undersea cable deployment. The security agreement signed with the Solomon Islands in May 2022 exemplifies this approach, accompanied by a Memorandum of Understanding on cooperation in the blue economy encompassing technological and infrastructural domains.

China's growing footprint has prompted growing concern among the region's traditional powers. Australia, in particular, has emerged as the most active diplomatic and economic actor, especially in Melanesia. In October 2025, Canberra concluded its second mutual defence treaty in more than 70 years with Papua New Guinea, guaranteeing Australia unrestricted access to Papua New Guinean territory in the event of a tangible regional security threat. By consolidating defence ties with Port Moresby, the Albanese government seeks to deter any prospective Chinese military presence that could threaten northern Australia. Concurrently, Australian firms are expanding their digital investments, notably through the Vocus-Google partnership under the South Pacific Connect initiative, an AUD 80 million programme aimed at establishing a new regional undersea cable network.

These efforts complement the reinforcement of the United States' military posture across Micronesian territories. Guam, now among the most militarised islands globally, hosts 52 military installations, including nuclear submarine bases and strategic B-1 and B-2 stealth bomber facilities, covering 28 per cent of the island's landmass. The Pentagon also plans to advance the development of enhanced integrated air and missile defence systems on the island. The US military is concurrently modernising Palau's Malakal Port, the microstate's main harbour, to enable US naval vessels to refuel, resupply, and eventually rearm. Yet the ongoing crisis in Western Asia, linked to Operation Epic Fury and the confrontation with Iran, risks prolonging US military commitments in the region, which could limit Washington's ability to maximise its strategic presence in Micronesia in the medium to long term.

Despite renewed Western engagement, Beijing continues to exploit existing vulnerabilities, particularly in Melanesia and Polynesia. Kiribati holds major strategic value for China, as control over the archipelago would enable Beijing to constrain the air and maritime corridors linking the US and Australia. Chinese diplomacy has also shown growing interest in New Caledonia, closely monitoring the island's evolving constitutional arrangements. Its geographical significance is substantial: located near the Tropic of Capricorn, it constitutes the third-largest archipelago in the Pacific Ocean.

In granting greater autonomy to local authorities in the management of New Caledonia's diplomatic relations, the Bougival Agreement could expose the French territory to Chinese geopolitical interests. Recent agreements between China and the Cook Islands, including deep-sea mining projects in a nickel- and cobalt-rich zone, provide a precedent for this. As a former New Zealand colony, the conclusion of this agreement weakens Wellington's geopolitical

position in Polynesia, particularly given the free association pact through which New Zealand grants Cook Islanders citizenship and passports. Over time, such dynamics could extend into the military domain, offering Beijing a decisive tactical advantage in the event of a conflict over Taiwan. Should local authorities pursue this trajectory, it would directly affect regional geopolitical stability and fundamentally alter the strategic order that has underpinned peace in the South Pacific since 1945.

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