



The Chinese Advancement in the Pacific Islands and The Global Hegemonic Battle

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ABSTRACT

The hegemonic battle aggravates as the days pass, with narratives ranging from an overpowered China accomplishing its “China Dream”, to an intricate manifestation of a multipolar world. While a significant chunk of importance has been given to many different regions around the world (Middle-East, Arctic, South and Central American region, etc.), a specific segment of the Indo-Pacific region with a potential to stand decisive in the U.S.-China rivalry, has been often neglected in the international discourse, namely the Pacific Island chain. The Pacific Islands that comprise of Micronesia, Melanesia, and Polynesia have a pivotal impact on the geopolitical strategy of the U.S., accredited to their geostrategic location, and the Exclusive Economic Zones, which gives it command over critical trading routes. China has seemed to have understood the relevance of the region, as it asserts its national interest through a multi-dimensional approach, employing methods like investments in dual-use infrastructure, Debt-trap diplomacy through BRI initiatives, building ports and military bases, assisting its naval operation, undersea water cables etc. The following article will examine the geostrategic importance of the Pacific Islands for both China and the U.S., discussing the Chinese investments in the region, and the implications on the U.S. geopolitical situation, with policy recommendations for the same.



Introduction

The Pacific Islands that incorporate 14 independent states divided into three sub regional divisions, namely Melanesia which includes Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu, Micronesia, which incorporates smaller islands like the Marshall Islands, Palau and Federated States of Micronesia, and Polynesia, which extends from the Hawaii islands to New Zealand incorporating Samoa and Tonga (UNESCO, 2025).

These islands which look tiny on the map, with their Exclusive Economic Zone that comprises of an oceanic area greater to that of the United States of America, a command over critical sea lanes of communication, significant supply of certain fisheries like Tuna, and deep-sea minerals that are important for the emerging green technologies, cast a major shadow on the world, especially the countries in the Indo-Pacific region (UNESCO, 2025).

From a geopolitical standpoint, these countries are related to the second island chain, which includes Guam, Palau, Northern Mariana Islands, parts of Papua New Guinea, extending to the third island chain. While the U.S. looks at this region as a conduit of portraying a strategic denial to the Chinese assertions, while enhancing logistical support, intelligence gathering and influence the geopolitical struggle in the South China Sea, China looks at these islands as an opportunity of expanding its horizons beyond the “near seas”, acquiring resources and tackling U.S. operations advancing through the region with the help of their grey zone tactics and dual use technologies.

China’s interest and advancement in the region have seen aggravation in the last decade, which includes security pacts, economic advancement through the BRI, and investments in dual-use technologies. Some of the important events include the diplomatic switches in Solomon Island and Kiribati in 2019, Nauru in 2024, the security agreement with the Solomon Islands, and a firm portrayal of assertion through activities like the Tasman Sea Drills.

Literature Overview

The literature on Chinese engagement and advancement in the Pacific Islands has been less, but has been increasing in the past few years, changing from what were just restricted to Chinese “debt trap” diplomacy, and military engagements, now elucidate the multi domain engagement of the Chinese empire.



Scholars like K. Underwood (2024) have talked about the strategic importance of the Pacific Islands to the U.S., while Wallis & Tubilewicz (2025) do the same, explaining the strategic significance of these Pacific Islands for China.

Contemporary literature also incorporates a more nuanced understanding of China's use of Dual-use infrastructure, as elucidated by Yang (2025) who provides a detail of port and airport advancement done by the Chinese empire. Scholars like Edel and Paik (2025) support the literature by portraying a broader angle to Chinese advancement, done through methods like Economic Leverage, naval activities, expanding their presence and influence in the process.

The initial warnings lie in country specific accounts like the rumours spread about the Chinese base in Vanuatu captured by O'Keefe (2018) in his assessment of the same. Chinese engagement has also been captured by scholars like Yegiora (2025) who in his account regarding Chinese relation with PNG talks about these multi-domain advancements from the Chinese side.

The paper brings together these elements, moving ahead of the isolated country specific or domain specific case studies, integrating accounts from different countries, covering the multiple domains on which the Chinese leadership is engaging. The paper also talks about the implications of the following on the US-China rivalry and the broader hegemonic struggle.

Research Question

What are the methods employed for Chinese assertion in the Pacific Islands and their extent on the US-China rivalry and the broader struggle for global dominance?

Methodology

The study primarily uses a qualitative methodology where it analyses secondary sources using an interpretivist approach, like articles, news reports and academic papers from prominent news sources, think tanks and research centres to understand the tactics employed by Beijing, providing case studies of the Solomon Islands Security Pact, Papua New Guinea Dual use infrastructure, and Vanuatu's rumoured naval base, to support the argument.

The paper intends to draw a thematic analyse on the patterns recognised in the methods employed by Beijing of Economic, Leverage, grey-zone tactics and facilitating diplomatic switches. The research will be based on deductions, taking these case studies to address the central question of the method employed



by the Chinese leadership for engagement and its implications on the rivalry with the United States of America

The Geostrategic Importance of Pacific Islands to the United States of America

The Pacific Islands is home to one of the most dominant U.S. Military postures in the Indo-Pacific region. Moreover, Guam, Palau, Northern Mariana Island and the Federated States of Micronesia which constitute the second island chain acts as a defensive buffer in the hind part of the U.S. region, with arrangements that provide logistical and intelligence support. These islands also provide an entry to the United States in the South China Sea where it is positioned to put a potential check on the Chinese assertion in Taiwan and Philippines. The U.S. has signed the Compacts of Free Association (COFA), with the Freely Associated States including Palau, Marshall Islands and Federated States of Micronesia, which gives it military access, right to create bases, and control over the vast Exclusive Economic Zones, while it covers economic aid, security and migration for its citizens (Underwood, 2004).

The COFA renewal agreements have committed more than 7 billion dollars in the last two decades, which have helped in the building of facilities like airfields and make radar upgrades, which assists U.S. Agile Combat Employment or ACE preparations, and converted this region into a refuelling base, and a prominent command centre. Moreover, the additional bilateral agreements on defence cooperation such as Papua New Guinea and Fiji, enhance the US stronghold (Underwood, 2004).

However, apart from the military access, there is an economic aspect involved as well, as the vast Exclusive Economic Zones hold deep sea minerals like cobalt and nickel, which is significant because of the current dwindling of the supply chain, because of the competition with China, along with rich fisheries as well. Moreover, many U.S. initiatives like seabed research cooperation tackles China's expansion of its underwater cables and inroads. From a diplomatic perspective, the UN voting power held by these states also adds to the influence while safeguarding US territories like the American Samoa (Underwood, 2004).

While there are challenges like a perception of U.S. engagement, existing because of economic aid restrictions and policy changes, which has created a vacuum for the rival countries to intervene, making significant investments in infrastructure, climate, and consistency in the partnership, to maintain credibility and its capabilities to mitigate aggression shown by rival factions (Underwood, 2004).



The Strategic Importance of Pacific Islands for China

While China has viewed The Pacific Islands as secondary to many critical regions which are pivotal to its broader China Dream of becoming the middle kingdom, for a very long time, it has started to understand its importance, evident in its investments and involvement in the 21st century, compounded in the last decade. China views The Pacific Islands as a tool to strategically tackle the U.S. dominance in the Indo Pacific Ocean region, isolate Taiwan, build projects that assert Chinese dominance. The region also provides critical routes to the People Liberation Army, to work on operations which requires operability into the far-seas. Moreover, it helps China create a security development nexus, which comprises of economic leverage gained through the Belt and Road initiative, policing ties, investment in dual-use infrastructure and aggression where required (Wallis & Tubilewicz, 2025).

The access to resources is critical for China as well, evident in its investments in the region's tuna stocks, and deep-sea mining partnerships like the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership agreement signed with the Cook Island in February 2025, which talks about access over seabed minerals significant for green technologies and defence. Moreover, 9 countries participating in the BRI provides advantage in the form of debts and perception building (Wallis & Tubilewicz, 2025).

China also invests in military facilities which expands its potential. This approach which encompasses bilateral deals with countries, grey-zone tactics, and agreements which advance Xi Jinping's vision of reviving the China Dream and become the Middle Kingdom through a manner that is non-confrontational (Wallis & Tubilewicz, 2025).

China's Advancement in the Pacific Islands: Examples and Dual-Use Strategy

China has been increasing its aggression in the region through multiple domains encompassing infrastructure, security, and aggression where required. This can be illustrated through the various events that can be observed as case studies ranging from the security pact signed by The Solomon Islands to the rumours of the Vanuatu Naval Base.

Methods employed by the Chinese Leadership

Dual-Use Infrastructure

There have been 17 upgrades done in airport or airstrips through Chinese contracted companies, mostly in the Papua New Guinea. Nine of the prominent ports in the region have also seen investment with the capacity of aircraft and warship berthing (Yang, 2025).



Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, etc also host major Huawei ICT projects, which includes broadbands, data centres, cables, making them potent for being utilised as a surveillance network. As some of these locations are strategic World War II sites, they have been funded by the BRI, and made in a way to provide logistical support to the PLA (Yang, 2025).

The Belt and Road Initiative and Debt Trap Diplomacy

Many states in the Pacific islands have joined the Belt and Road Initiative, under which China lends the most amount of money to countries like Papua New Guinea, Fiji, Tonga, Samoa, Vanuatu, etc. However Pacific countries have become cautious about taking more Chinese debt. As an initiative taken to create the Maritime Silk Route, 11 Pacific nations signed a Memoranda of Understanding between 2016 and 2019. While there have been no asset seizures, it still provides a leverage to the Chinese state (Edel & Paik, 2025; Wallis & Tubilewicz, 2025; Yang, 2025).

Moreover, while the IMF maintains its intrusive style of lending, the Chinese lending conditions, with 97% of its loan until 2019 were more concessional in nature, with low interest rate of 2 percent and having up-to 20-year maturities. In 2024 BRI projects expanded by more than 200% where China provided labour and loans for projects like the Faleolo Airport upgrades in Samoa, and the 10,000-seater sports stadium in the Solomon Islands (Wallis & Tubilewicz, 2025; Yang, 2025).

The major objective revolves around pushing its narrative, dismantling the US influence and isolating Taiwan. This is evident from Taiwan's relation with the nations in the region. While Taiwan had 7 diplomatic partners in 2000, it had only 3 by 2025. In 2024, Solomon Islands under the bilateral Security Pact signed with China in 2022, led an Anti-Taiwan charge.

Chinese assertion in the recent times

China has also projected its aggression in the recent times as well. An example of the following can be the PLA live fire drills in February 2025 in the Tasman Sea, which consisted of the three-ship task group including Type 055 cruiser Zunyi, Type 054A frigate Hengyang, and the replenishment ship Weishanhu, disrupted flights without a warning (Wallis & Tubilewicz, 2025).

Some of the examples which elucidate the following developments at various points in the last decade are as follows:



Solomon Islands Security Pact 2022

The agreement signed in April 2022, during the instability after the circumstances posed by the riot, with a framework agreement which has still not been made publicly available even after pledges of transparency. However, a leaked version of the drafts showcased how police, armed police, military personnel, and other forces of law enforcement which will provide assistance in the social order, humanitarian aid, and preserving Chinese personnel and project (Bielakowska, 2026).

The agreement permits the Naval Ships of the People's Liberation Army, to make visits regarding logical replenishments. China maintained rotating police advisers, which included 12 personnel appointed through the China Public Security Bureau Solomon Islands Policing Advisory Group, which also supplies gear, vehicles and provides training as well (Bielakowska, 2026).

While a policing pact in 2023 strengthened ties between the two countries, a controversial surveillance assessment done for social control including fingerprints and palm prints drew attention. Solomon Islands doesn't allow any basing initiative but lets it act under the grey-zone providing intelligence and quick access.

The Case of Papua New Guinea

Papua New Guinea stands as the largest trading partner of China and also its biggest recipient of aid provision. Papua New Guinea also holds major BRI projects, which incorporates upgrades in the Lae Port, the National Power Grid, the Daru Fishery Industrial park, Kumul submarine cable, with almost 10 airstrips in Momote, Gurney, Jackson, Hoskins, etc. These projects are often contracted by SOEs that are linked with the People's Liberation Army like Sinohydro and CRCC, forming a dual-use ecosystem satisfying both civil and military purposes (Yegiora, 2025).

Papua New Guinea has also been successfully balancing its dual stance where it enjoys relations with both U.S. and Australia as well. However, the debt factor pushes it towards Beijing. As the 2025 marked a golden jubilee of the diplomatic ties between China and PNG, new grants were discussed in the field of infrastructure and STEM fields (Yegiora, 2025).

The Rumoured Base at Vanuatu and Dual-use Projects

There were rumours regarding a Naval Base which was allegedly completed in 2017, at the Luganville Wharf which is funded by the Chinese Shanghai Construction Group, which provided an Exim bank loan



of 97 million USD, denied by all the parties that were accused of being a part of this project (Edel & Paik, 2025; O'Keefe, 2018).

These rumours were followed by the sightings of workers with PLA-Navy uniforms near the Luganville airport, and the visits made by the type-055 destroyers in 2024, which increased concerns (Edel & Paik, 2025; O'Keefe, 2018).

There were more upgrades as well in the Pekoa and Nekoa airports, fiber-optic networks, which had been introduced in 2008, has been expanding in the last decade, which also has potential for dual-use. Vanuatu also holds Chinese police training, and also faces the issue laid by the debt-trap diplomacy employed by China (O, Keefe, 2018).

Initiatives in Other relevant Countries

A similar pattern of Chinese influence is visible in other countries as well. One of the examples of the following can be the diplomatic switch in Kiribati 2019. China also signed a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Agreement with the Cook Islands which created an alarming situation for New Zealand as well. Countries like Fiji, Tonga, and Samoa also have police academies, and have witnessed port upgrades while suffering from high debts. China has been maintaining police advisers in many states of the region. While it failed to get a multilateral pact but has built strong bilateral ties (Edel & Paik, 2025).

There are also Chinese ships which have been found circumnavigating Australia, drones that have intruded the airspace of Papua New Guinea, Task groups like the 2025 December Task Group where a Type 075 amphibious ship was operating near Palau (Edel & Paik, 2025).

These kinds of actions normalised presence, assess the responses from the other countries and project its power strategically in the region beyond the first Island chain.

Implications for the United States

China's advancing in the Pacific region has a significant impact on both U.S. security and its objective of maintaining its influence as the hegemon. Moreover, the various tactics used by the PLA and Chinese leadership makes it tough for the United States of America to keep a check on the growing Chinese assertion and protecting and its allies.

Some of the factors that are to be focused on are as follows:



- The disruption of U.S. forces, the Chinese force projection and the logistical support that China is getting through the Dual-use airports, airstrips and ports that it has made in the countries like Papua New Guinea can facilitate the People's Liberation Army, to gather both intelligence and resupply during a conflict with Taiwan. Moreover, the situation complicates further as the Chinese surge can move beyond the first chain of Islands and threaten the U.S. territories and the pivotal Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs).
- The agreements like the pact signed between China and the Solomon Islands regarding security in 2022, provides Beijing an opening to operate ambiguously, facilitating the grey-zone tactics used by them, which will further assist it in gathering intelligence, basing, which weakens the U.S. ability to battle its opponents.
- This also creates a loss in the diplomatic and resource paradigm, where Chinese expanding influence Taiwan, and the following switches in the diplomatic approach of the numerous countries in the region like Kiribati, the deep-sea mining and fisheries agreements signed Beijing, erodes US influence over both critical minerals and voting blocs.
- The US allies like Australia and New Zealand both bear the brunt of these developments as they have to survive in an uncertain environment and also bear the cost for monitoring these developments, amid U.S. aid fluctuations. Any unchecked Chinese assertion could lead to a more hefty defence expenditure, risking the pacific states, leading to a shift in the balance in the region and potential conflicts.

These implications strain the situation for the U.S. in the region, creating obstacles, making deterrence tough, where even if existential threat that occur immediately are avoided, the effects are long term.

The Hegemonic Battle in the Indo-Pacific Region

The situation in the Pacific stands as an example of the U.S.- China hegemonic struggle, where China works on the gradual disruption of the U.S. influence in its hind part through projecting an influence at multiple levels encompassing the securing of resources, isolation of Taiwan and a normalised presence in the region without any direct confrontation, evident in its bilateral approach which is different from the US Multilateral approach. The U.S. on the other hand works on the securitisation of its hind part and maintain an influence over important sea lines of communication, preventing Taiwan from getting



isolated. The Tasman drills and the Cook Island pact show Chinese increasing influence in the last year which is alarming for the U.S. who has enjoyed a stronghold over the region for a very long time.

The success of the U.S. depends in its approach, where it can either engage in the region and work on the priorities of the Pacific nations or neglect the changing order in the region. The outcomes regarding the same will determine if the region will become a hub of Chinese influence or maintain its identity of being a firm U.S. network, which is crucial especially in a time where the global order is changing drastically.

Conclusion

China's strategy employed in the Pacific islands shows patience into a process that is gradual but effective, where it utilises its dual-use infrastructure, economic leverages and assertion when required, evident from its security pacts, improving infrastructure and the expanding naval reach. However, they still don't have a permanent base. U.S. still enjoys an advantage as it has a formal relation with the countries in the region, which require serious reinforcement. The hegemonic battle in this region will be decided based on which power acts first and treats these regions as partners rather than proxies. Washington has to focus on the region's interest, aligning it with the global trends, working on issues like climate, while investing in infrastructure that helps it deterring Chinese influence. A failure of this can lead to a change in the Indo-Pacific order which also might affect the struggle for hegemony drastically as well.

Author's Bio

Bhaskar Jha is a budding researcher with a keen interest in Geopolitical hedging and Diplomacy, currently pursuing a Master's in Diplomacy Law and Business program in O.P. Jindal Global University.

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