

MANAGING GROWING STRATEGIC COMPETITION IN THE SOUTH PACIFIC: HEDGING THE PACIFIC WAY

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ABSTRACT

United States (U.S.)-China strategic competition in the Pacific has intensified along with China's growing engagement with Pacific Island countries. The expanding body of literature on this topic focuses heavily on the geopolitical implications for traditional powers, in particular the U.S., Australia and New Zealand, with less attention on Pacific responses. This thesis helps address this gap with a focus on how the Pacific Island countries are managing growing strategic competition and analysis of Pacific policies and strategies towards China and traditional Western partners. It asks whether Pacific countries are seeking to balance against, adopt a middle position or ally with China, how traditional Western partners factor into this equation and what the driving forces behind Pacific responses and approaches to growing strategic competition are. It goes beyond the dichotomous debate between balancing and bandwagoning to explore mixed strategies like hedging and non-alignment and employs a mixed method approach across case studies on Pacific regionalism, Fiji, Samoa and Kiribati. The thesis finds that each case shares four basic features: a coherent diplomatic strategy and engagement policy toward China and traditional Western partners; a priority for internal development needs and security concerns; a focus on development aid and economic benefits; and an approach that seeks to maximise the benefits of engagement. The findings demonstrate that these Pacific Island countries are not choosing between China and the U.S. (or by extension their traditional Western partners Australia and New Zealand). Rather, they are exhibiting "hedging" and "non-alignment" behaviour and are expressing their preference for maintaining relatively autonomous foreign and security policies. This strategy is driven by regional needs (such as regional self-determination, climate change, ocean management, sustainable development and humanitarian assistance) and individual state needs (such as ensuring autonomy in their foreign policies and domestic development policies and interests). Across all cases, the thesis finds that Pacific leaders are not publicly concerned about having to choose sides and have largely rebuffed the "China threat" narrative. Instead, they are following the "Pacific Way" by stressing their own collective agency through narratives like the Blue Pacific, with emphasis on sovereignty and regional identity, and seeking to utilise relations with China to pursue their own interests.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

China's rise as a global power is undeniable. After decades of the United States' (U.S.) hegemony in the international relations since the fall of the Soviet Union during Cold War, China has emerged as a competing global power in terms of both its economic and political influence (Art, 2010). Moreover, according to Wallis and Strating (2022), during the Trump administration, strategic and economic competition between the U.S. and China became more explicit which further resulted in Oceania being viewed as a stage on which these new security and economic rivalries would be played out. Unsurprisingly, China has become a major player in the Pacific region.

An obvious effect of the U.S.-China rivalry in the Pacific region is that the Pacific leaders are no longer pressed to work with the current dominant powers in the region, particularly Australia and New Zealand, or their other traditional Western partners such as the U.S. and the United Kingdom. There is no doubt that Pacific Islands deeply rely on aid and assistance from bigger developed countries. However, with China prepared to assist (along with other new players in the region such as Indonesia, India, Taiwan and Japan), these Island states now have options they did not have some years ago. With China's heightened interest in the Pacific, the Pacific Islands now have freedom to self-determine various crucial aspects of their lives without having to rely on the traditional partners. As Fry (2019) put it that "when the West sees a threat to its interests in the Pacific at a time of global rivalry, the Pacific Island states have greater bargaining power".

There are concerns that China has a strategic plan to replace the U.S as the preeminent power in the Pacific Ocean. For instance, in early 2011, Hillary Clinton (the then U.S. Secretary of State) told the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee that the U.S. was in competition with China in the Pacific (Hayward-Jones, 2013). Other concerns about China's rise include that the chequebook diplomacy rivalry between Beijing and Taipei is making Pacific politics more corrupt, more violent and is exacerbating underlying political, social, and economic tensions in the region (Yang, 2011). These concerns are shared by other traditional players in the region which has prompted these countries to implement new foreign policy initiatives explicitly or implicitly designed to counter China's growing sway in the region.

On the China front, however, there is a great deal of ambiguity around how China plans to wield its growing influence in the Pacific. For instance, on the one hand, a Chinese military officer in 2013 claimed that the U.S. would be forced out of the Pacific by a rising China (Garnaut, 2013), while on the other hand, China insists that it has no specific interest in the Pacific, and that this is just a natural extension of China's growing engagement in all developing countries (Zhang, 2017).

Much of the debate about China's rise in the Pacific tends to focus on implications for the strategic dominance of the U.S. and its regional partners, particularly Australia (Wesley-Smith, 2016). Most existing studies and discussions have been around the strategies and foreign policies of the competing countries, in particular China, U.S., Australia and New Zealand. Any discussion, if at all, on how Pacific Island countries are managing growing strategic competition and what their policies and strategies are, take the form of brief side notes. It goes without saying that the issue of China's rise and strategic competition in the Pacific is significant for all inhabitants of the Pacific and is particularly critical for the Pacific Island countries as they are at the centre of the competition. Notwithstanding, the Pacific perspective and their strategies and approaches to dealing with great power competition remain the weakest part of the debate. Critical questions such as, what are the foreign policies of Pacific Island countries; how Pacific Island states are managing the strategic competition and how are the island nations dealing with the competing countries, remain unexplored.

1. Literature Review

While there is no shortage of studies on strategic competition, those studies mostly explore strategic competition between the U.S and China in Asia. Ali (2015) examines the evolution, nature and consequences of strategic competition between U.S and China, which affects the global security landscape and the emerging security architecture across the broader Asia-Pacific region. While Ali provides some interesting insight into both the dangers and opportunities presented by this strategic competition, he does not amply explore strategic competition in the Pacific. In light of the growing Chinese engagement in the Pacific, the book merely recaps Obama's remarks during G20 in Brisbane in 2014 which was to deploy more of their most advanced military capabilities to keep the peace and deter aggression or base a

majority of their Navy and Air Force fleets in the Pacific by the decade's end, because (in Obama's words), "the United States is, and will always be, a Pacific power".

Much of the early literature on the rise of China and strategic competition in the Pacific focused on the geopolitical implications for traditional powers and were alarmist in nature. Henderson and Reilly (2003) argued that China "is incorporating the Pacific Islands into its broader quest to become a major Asia-Pacific power", while Henderson (2001) characterised the Pacific as "undergoing a geopolitical transition from American to Asian influence". Early literature often portrayed the Pacific Island countries as "vulnerable to manipulation" (Windybank, 2005).

Other reports (such as O'Hanlon and Steinberg, 2017; Xinbo, 2019; Heydarian, 2015; Wesley-Smith, 2016; etc.) on strategic competition in Asia-Pacific similarly predominantly focusses on Asia. Any discussion on the Pacific fails to include the Pacific perspective and their approach to dealing with the strategic competition in the region. This is possibly due to the U.S.' belief that the main threats to its interests are in Asia from China.

Recently, studies on this topic have gained momentum due to the continuous escalation of the U.S.-China rivalry in the region but the Pacific perspective, strategies and policies are still not being adequately covered. Having said that, some recent research has attempted to provide a more balanced perspective. For instance, Yang (2011) looks at Chinese involvement in and policy towards the South Pacific in the context of China's grand strategy. In doing this, Yang's research is around Chinese sources and interviews with Chinese policy makers and elites. While he posits that for Fiji, China is a generous source of development money and a convenient political leverage to use against its hostile neighbours, Australia and New Zealand, he does not delve into this to reinforce this notion. Similarly, Brady (2010) pinpoints China's involvement in the Pacific within the context of China's wider foreign policy, the challenges it poses to the traditional dominant powers of the region and examines Taiwanese and New Zealand perspective.

Chen (2018) concedes that the Belt and Road initiative in the South Pacific attracts relatively less attention and that knowledge about the South Pacific countries remains insufficient. In light of this, he proposes a policy study on the practical policy measures for China to push

forward China-South Pacific Countries Belt and Road Initiative cooperation. He evaluates current political-economic situation of the South Pacific countries and then suggests practical measures to promote China-SPC BRI cooperation.

Fry (2019) investigates the geopolitical scuffle in the region and its impact on the regional governance of key issues for the Pacific such as regional development, resource management, security, cultural identity, political agency, climate change and nuclear involvement. While the book mostly explores the European idea of placing a regional frame around the South Pacific since the colonial period, it reveals how Pacific Islanders have successfully promoted their own powerful normative framings of Oceania in the face of attempted hegemonic impositions from outside the region through the regionalism lens. Smith and Wesley-Smith (2021) have made a good attempt by putting the Pacific Island states at the centre of the analysis in the book's chapters covering the growing great power competition in the region. However, while they provide material around the ability of island leaders to maintain their agency in the changing regional order, the book, like other studies, places a great deal of emphasis on the response to China's rise by the U.S. and its Western allies.

Most discussions on this topic are covered by news media articles and interviews (such as ABC News and Radio NZ), scholars on Pacific affairs (Terrance Wesley-Smith, Michael Powles, Graeme Smith, and so on), Think Tanks (the Lowy Institute), journals (New Zealand International Reviews), speeches at conferences and roundtable debates. For instance, Powles (2015) is a product of a conference convened in Samoa in February 2015 where Pacific voices were given the limelight, ensuring that their messages and viewpoints were clearly conveyed to Beijing, Canberra and Wellington. Although the Conference was a breakthrough, Powles' review does not distinctly and identifiably set out the views of the Pacific people.

2. The Gap and Aim of the Thesis

Despite rapidly growing studies on this topic and the Pacific being the focus of the contestation, there is inadequate coverage on how the Pacific Island countries are managing the growing strategic competition in the region; what policies and strategies they are adopting to respond to the rise of China in the region and what are the driving forces behind their responses and approaches.

There is an obvious gap in current research in this area. While some studies have made passing comments about the Pacific Islands' views and approaches to the growing great power competition, no author has fully devoted an entire study to the subject.

The reason for the lack of coverage on the Pacific perspective is most likely due to the Western perception of smallness, remoteness and vulnerableness of the Pacific Island countries and most certainly due to the power-centered nature of international relations. This has resulted in scholars not being bothered to adopt the perspective of the Pacific nations who are by far the most remote countries in the world and often appear to be the helpless pawns at the mercy of great-power interests. Actually, this is not surprising as vast majority of IR scholarship have generally adopted a great-power-centric approach which according to Waltz (1979) is because the major powers "set the scene of action for others as well as for themselves", and the fates of all the states "are affected much more by the acts and the interactions of the major ones than of the minor ones". Therefore, it is only logical that the theory of international politics is written in terms of the great powers of an era.

However, to fully appreciate the dynamics of the strategic competition in the Pacific, it is important to evaluate the perspective of Pacific Island countries. Pacific Island countries are the smallest remotest sovereign states in the world and perhaps the most unique in terms of their indigenous cultural heritage. Thus, by exploring the perspective of these small remote islands and focusing on their policy choices and approaches to the strategic competition in the region would result in a more representative approach to better explain international politics and international events. As Habeeb (1986) explains that the course of international affairs is not only a product of great power behaviour but also often a result of small state-great power interaction and negotiation.

The aim of this thesis is to fill this gap and address the simple but significant puzzles – how are Pacific Island countries managing the growing strategic competition in the region and what are their strategies and policies to dealing with the rise of China and their traditional Western partners. This thesis investigates whether Pacific countries are seeking to balance against, adopt a middle position or ally with China and how their traditional Western partners factor into this equation. In addressing these interrelated puzzles, this thesis aims to highlight the driving forces behind Pacific responses and approaches to growing strategic competition.

3. Theoretical Framework

The author of this thesis subscribes to the view that the direction of international politics and the behaviour of states are not determined by a single variable and that the outcome of power transitions is not predetermined (Robert, Ross and Feng, 2015). Thus, this thesis does not reflect the perspective of a single theoretical tradition and instead considers multiple paradigms of international relations. The author of this thesis agrees with Sill and Katzensteinn (2010) that while discoveries and research based on a single theory generate sophisticated arguments and uncover different realities, they risk becoming dominated by “self-referential academic debates at the expense of addressing the complexities and messiness of everyday problems”. This is not to reject or ignore the work done by adherents of particular theories. However, it is to end making assumptions that one or another research tradition is inherently superior to another. Furthermore, when it comes to small islands, according to Bertram (2014), social scientists have special interest in them because of the way they “throw up surprises that remind us of the limitations of common assumptions and theories”.

Therefore, while investigating the keys questions, the author ensured not to limit the scope of the research to one paradigm as doing so would have been counterproductive. The topic is complex, and all effort has been made to ensure its complexity is reflected in this thesis, rather than an oversimplified material based on a single theory-based approach. Simplifications based on a single theoretical lens involve “trade-offs and can produce enduring blind spots” (Scott, 1995). Thus, this thesis focuses on the central questions and follows the road of problem-driven rather than paradigm-driven research. The author investigates the key questions with an open mind and takes an eclectic approach by trespassing deliberately and liberally across competing research traditions. As Peter Evans wisely stated that, “No single ready-made theoretical model can provide the tools to explain the cases [he is] interested in, but an eclectic combination offers enough leverage to make a start” (Kohli, 1998).

Recent international relations scholarship is seen to be putting forward a more eclectic perspective while eschewing paradigmatic debate. For instance, Kang's (2007) analysis of China's rise is search for “interconnections between causal factors, rather than isolating one factor at the expense of others.” Kang investigates why East Asia is not so much balancing

against as bandwagoning with China. While this question reflects the core concerns of realists, Kang posits that an adequate response to this question requires consideration of ideas, preferences, intentions, beliefs, norms, identities, and assessments of the world. The practical implication of this analysis is that China needs to be understood as a status quo and not as a revisionist state in international affairs. Kang's complex interpretation challenges existing theories— whether realist, liberal, or constructivist—that focus on certain factors at the expense of others in characterizing China's rise as problematic for stability in East Asia (Ravenhill, Katzenstein, Snidal, Sil, Nau, Inayatullah, Reus-Smit, and Blaney, 2008).

In respect of small states being faced by changing balance of power or the rise of a new and increasingly influent player, for a long time, international relations scholars have offered only two broad patterns of behaviour - balancing or bandwagoning (Waltz, 1979). Scholars claimed that states (particularly smaller states) either tried to contain a rising power or preferred to align with it, in order to maximize potential benefits. Kuik (2010), in investigating what states do when faced with an increasingly strong and/or potentially threatening big power discusses that mainstream international relations theorists have offered two general responses to this question which are that states are likely to either “align against” (balancing strategy) or “align with” that power (bandwagoning behaviour).

However, Kuik argues that this dichotomy has progressively become incapable to grasping the essence of contemporary relations between small and great powers. According to Fiori and Passeri (2015), this is especially the case in the evolving political realm of the Asia-Pacific, profoundly marked by the rise of China. Kuik contends that balancing and bandwagoning can be viewed as extraordinary strategies that states adopt under extraordinary circumstances whereas under other and/or “ordinary” circumstances, smaller states adopt policies other than the two straightforward choices. Under ordinary circumstances, smaller states do not have to choose between balancing and bandwagoning. In situations where states are not endangered by a direct threat, they will tend to opt for "mixed strategies" - a more nuanced and pragmatic approach whereby states, especially small states, secure a middle position amidst great power competition. This approach has become progressively known in literature as ‘hedging’ (Fiori and Passeri, 2015).

Hedging strategy identifies a set of multidimensional “insurance policies” adopted by small actors in their relations vis-à-vis great powers (Fiori and Passeri, 2015). According to Kuik (2010):

[I]n circumstances where the stakes are high but the sources of dangers and opportunities are uncertain, smaller states will be more inclined to maintain equidistance and pursue mixed strategies vis- a-vis the big powers. The strategies would constitute a hedging behavior, if they are intended to maximize anticipated benefits while providing a fallback position to cushion against undesired risks.

Goh (2007) describes the pattern of small states’ behaviour as a “cultivation of a middle position”, which preserves “multiple potential options and avoids a more explicit alignment with one side”.

As such, this thesis goes beyond the dichotomous debate between balancing and bandwagoning. It explores mixed strategies like “hedging” and “non-alignment” in addition to investigating whether regional/indigenous identity plays any role in how the Pacific Island countries are dealing with the strategic competition.

Method

Given the eclectic nature of this project and the growing consensus among social scientists that research programs advance more effectively through the iterative or collaborative use of different research methods than through the use of any one method alone (Peters, 2007), this project adopts mixed methods, that is, both qualitative and quantitative.

There is more emphasis on qualitative study since the goal of this research is to explain a phenomenon by relying on the perceptions of a particular community. As outlined by Creswell (2003), a quantitative approach is appropriate when a researcher seeks to understand relationships between variables. Because the purpose of this thesis was to investigate the perceptions and approaches of the Pacific Island countries in respect of the heightened strategic competition, a predominantly qualitative approach was the most appropriate choice.

The author’s preliminary intention was to conduct face-to-face interviews by visiting the selected Pacific Island countries. However, given the COVID-19 situation and travel

restrictions, this research method was halted. Therefore, the author mostly relied on secondary data such as newspaper articles, radio interviews, publications by scholars, journals, speeches at conferences and roundtable discussions.

The author opted for case studies to address the core questions of this thesis. For both qualitative and quantitative study, data was collected from existing sources like government websites and resources; past research, field notes and semi-structured/structured interviews of other scholars; non-government sources that deal with market research reports; public and university libraries; conference and forum reports; websites such as Google Scholar and JSTOR; and other existing research reports/papers. Data was also collected from commercial information sources such as local newspapers, journals, magazines, radio, TV stations, and so on. The secondary data obtained was then organised, collated and analysed. The author also made observations of people's opinions expressed online and on public forums. The author considered this a useful approach as these opinions were freely and openly expressed.

Given the circumstances, secondary data analysis was the most appropriate as it allowed for the research to be carried out within the timeframe and it was easily accessible. It also provided professionally collected higher-quality and large databases that would otherwise be unfeasible for the author to obtain directly given the scale of the research question. Further, since the research also touches on the history and development of the Pacific, it would have been impractical for the author to conduct a new survey that could adequately achieve this.

This thesis conducted four case studies, namely Pacific regionalism, Fiji, Samoa, and Kiribati. In respect of Pacific regionalism, this thesis, using the methods outlined above, investigated how the Pacific Islands are collectively managing and responding to great power competition at a regional level. Since the Pacific Islands are divided into three main groups based on physical geography, local inhabitants and location (namely Melanesia, Micronesia and Polynesia), this thesis also briefly explored the strategies, policies and the Pacific perspective at a sub-regional level. Fiji was chosen as a case study because it is the most developed economies in the Pacific while Samoa was chosen because it is arguably China's oldest and most faithful partner in the region and one of the most heavily indebted countries in the world to China. Kiribati, on the other hand, was chosen because of its strategic location.

Using the above methods, this thesis examined how the Pacific Island countries are managing the growing strategic competition in the region, what strategies and policies they are

adopting to deal with the rise of China, and how are their traditional Western partners factored into this equation. It investigated how the Pacific Islands are achieving success in their endeavours and what factors are propelling their behaviours and approaches. In unravelling the primary questions, this thesis also considered whether the Pacific Island countries feel their values and expectations are aligned with the competing countries and whether they feel adequately included and/or represented in the conversation about their future.

By means of the above methodology, this thesis argues that Pacific Island countries are inaccurately portrayed as fragile and weak states due to their smallness and remoteness. While it is true that Pacific Islands are dependent on larger powerful states and are far more affected by the actions of big powers than vice versa, this does not necessarily mean that they are powerless before the larger actors. This thesis argues that the Pacific Island countries are not pressed to choose sides and recognise that the strategic competition in the region affords them the liberty to focus on their domestic development needs and security concerns. As such, this thesis contends that the Pacific states are seeking to utilise relations with China to pursue their own interests without having to ally with China or balance against it.

This thesis argues that the Pacific Island countries are adopting mixed strategies such as hedging and non-alignment to pursue their own interests and maximise their gains from the strategic competition in the region with emphasis on sovereignty and regional identity. This thesis contends that the Pacific Islands are seeking to adopt such behaviour and exert influence over the competing powers by utilising their collective agency under Pacific regionalism and forming competitive relationships with China, their traditional Western partners and the new players in the region. This thesis essentially argues that the Pacific Island countries are exhibiting mixed strategies in their own way, the “Pacific Way”.

4. Overview of Individual Chapters

This thesis is divided into 6 chapters, including this introduction chapter. Chapter 2 provides a historical background of the Pacific and contextualises the research topic. It provides a backdrop for how the Pacific perspective was shaped. This chapter examines how the Pacific

Island states and its engagement with outside countries began and changed since the colonial period. It discusses the involvement, attitudes, and perspectives of the traditional players in the region, namely the U.S., Australia, New Zealand, United Kingdom, France, and Japan. The chapter explores the entry and rise of China in the region.

Chapter 3 investigates the strategies and foreign policies of the Pacific Island countries at a regional (and subregional) level. It examines how the Pacific states are using their collective sovereignty and agency to manage the strategic competition in the region and assert their views and interests in the face of a changing regional order through the various regional channels and institutions. It defines Pacific Regionalism from the viewpoint of the Pacific and explores the Pacific Islands' diplomatic strategies and security concerns with focus on economic impacts and development aid.

Chapters 4 and 5 undertakes case studies of three Pacific Island countries from each subregional grouping in the Pacific, namely Fiji, Samoa and Kiribati. Chapter 4 focuses on Fiji and examines the strategies and foreign policies of Fiji in response to the strategic competition between U.S. and China. Fiji has been chosen as a case study because it is a key player in the region and has characteristics that make it a heavy weight in the Pacific. Chapter 5 presents case studies on Samoa and Kiribati. This chapter investigates the strategies and foreign policies of Samoa and Kiribati. It highlights the approaches adopted by Samoa and Kiribati to address and manage the great power competition in the region.

Chapter 6 concludes the thesis by discussing and drawing together the main findings of the case studies.

CHAPTER 2

Overview

1. Pacific by Any Other Name

The Pacific consist of thousands of islands scattered across the central and southern Pacific Ocean, including to the north of the equator (Fray, 2019). It is a huge area stretching 17,000 km longitudinally from Australia to PNG in the west to South America in the east, and 7,000 km latitudinally from the equator of the Antarctic Ocean (Thakur, 1991). This region is also commonly referred to as Southwest Pacific, the Pacific, Pacific states, Pacific Islands, Pacific Island countries, South Seas, South Pacific and Oceania. This thesis mostly employs the term *the Pacific*. However, other terminologies mentioned above are also applied from time to time. So far as the terminology ‘Oceania’ is concerned, it often includes New Zealand and Australia.

The Pacific Island countries are organised into nine independent states (Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu); five associated states (Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Niue, Palau and Marshall Islands); and eight dependent territories—of France (New Caledonia, Wallis and Futuna, and French Polynesia), the United Kingdom (Pitcairn Islands), New Zealand (Tokelau) and the U.S. (American Samoa, Guam and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands) (Fray, 2019).

The traditional indigenous ways of life of the Pacific Islands are unique to the region and expressed through outstanding cultural landscapes and seascapes, settlements and monuments and in the intangible heritage of traditions, knowledge, stories, song, music and dance (Smith and Jones, 2007). The region is divided into three main geo-cultural sub-regions, along linguistic and geographical lines, namely Melanesia, Polynesia and Micronesia. These sub-regions include an extraordinary ethnolinguistic diversity. Melanesia alone accounts for one fifth of the world’s documented living languages. For instance, Vanuatu has no less than 105 Melanesian languages with a population of fewer than 200,000 (Roger, 2002). The size and population of each Pacific Island country varies considerably. Of the 9.7 million people that inhabit the 551.5 thousand square kilometre land area of Oceania, just over two-thirds

are in Papua New Guinea (Firth and Naidu, 2019). While known for its pristine beaches and cultural diversity, the Pacific is also strategically located and has resource-rich territories with open access to metropolitan labour markets.

2. Early Settlers, Colonisation and Decolonisation

The human settlement in the region occurred by the extraordinary seafaring and navigational skills of the ancestors of Pacific Island peoples over hundreds of years. Lee (2009) claims that the Pacific was settled from west to east in surges of movement between island groups over hundreds of years, eventually taking people as far as Hawai'i in the north, Rapanui/Easter Island in the east and Aotearoa/New Zealand in the south and throughout this process the migrants maintained networks of contact between some of the islands, travelling in various kinds of seagoing vessels.

First European contact with Pacific Islands began in the early to mid-17th century and continued until the mid-20th century. The annexation of the Pacific Islands by European nations began around mid to late 19th century. According to Fry (2019), the Europeans collectively perceived the Pacific Islanders as “childlike”, “child races” or as “savages” – whether “noble or ignoble”. This conception gained wind particularly once Darwinian theories of racial hierarchy were influential and made it possible for Europeans to think “they had the right, and even the responsibility, to colonise this part of the world” (Fry, 2019). Christian missionaries flocked to the Pacific Islands with the deliberate intention of changing its people and culture. As Fry (2019) described, the Europeans held the view that the “pagans needed Christianity and to be civilised; the child races needed protection, the wild needed to be tamed and, as science had established that Pacific islander were lower on the racial hierarchy, they required European rule”. The Pacific Islanders rapidly embraced Christianity which had a profound effect on the region's culture. Natural resources of the region such as pearl shell, sandalwood, beche-de-mer (sea cucumber) and whale oil also drew European traders to the region.

France annexed New Caledonia, Tahiti, Clipperton Island, Wallis and Futuna, while Britain annexed Vanuatu, Fiji Islands, Solomon Islands and several small islands including the Pitcairn Group. Germany had colonies in New Guinea, Samoa, the Bismarck Archipelago and many

small Micronesian Islands, while Australian Territories included New Guinea and Norfolk Island and those of New Zealand included the Cook Islands and Niue. Throughout the colonial period the Kingdom of Tonga retained Indigenous sovereignty (but was under British protection from 1900) (Smith and Jones, 2007). The Spanish-American Civil War, World War I and World War II resulted in the colonial rule of many of the colonies change hands, in some cases three or four times.

The Pacific people's description of the Pacific is constructed in opposition to the Western perspective. For example, Hau'ofa (1993) described the pre-colonial Pacific as a "sea of islands" within which people moved freely and frequently, created social networks, traded and exchanged goods, and at times engaged in conflict and attempted to exert dominance over one another. This is different to the Western perspective which emerged during the colonial period and emphasises the vastness of the Pacific Ocean and the small size and isolation of the areas of land dotted across it. According to Hau'ofa, the ocean is not regarded as a hindrance to the ongoing and enduring ties between the Pacific Islands and islanders. Instead, the ocean is what connects them.

The backdrop to the emergence of self-determination and commitment to decolonisation began around the 1960s with the signing of the UN Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples. Most Island leaders anxiously wanted to have direct control over their territories. For instance, Ratu Mara, at the 1972 South Pacific Conference, enquired why should "the gentlemen who sit in Paris and in Washington be deciding the pace and extent of the development of the people in this region?" (Ward, 1972).

Between 1960s to 1980s, most Pacific Island countries attained "independence" of varying degrees. This emergence of a large number of independent Pacific states scattered over a large area of ocean, together with the need for resources and the geopolitical shift towards Asia-Pacific, inevitably stimulated interest from outside powers. These powers included those with no former colonial links to the area such as China, the European Union, Indonesia, Japan, Russia, South Korea, India and Taiwan, and various nonstate actors such as international NGOs (namely, Greenpeace and Amnesty International), international agencies and private sector associations (Fray, 2019). During World War II, control over the Pacific Islands scattered across the vast Pacific Ocean was critical for both maintaining logistical supply lines

and for military force projection. Since then, the Pacific has mostly enjoyed latent status on the geopolitical stage until China's growing presence in the region (Pryke, 2020).

3. Rise of China in the Pacific

Geographically speaking, China is far away from the Pacific Island countries. However, China's connections with the Pacific have deep cultural and historical roots (Henderson and Reilly, 2003). These connections go as far back as 5000 years ago as one of the languages used by the first settlers in the Pacific originated in Taiwan. Research has revealed that Polynesian, Micronesian and eastern Melanesian people of the Pacific are linked to the indigenous people of Taiwan and evidence of markets for Pacific Island produce were discovered by European traders in China around the 1700s (Henderson and Reilly, 2003). This link expanded during the nineteenth century when a substantial number of Chinese migrants were brought to the Pacific as indentured labourers. This formed the basis for the small but usually prominent Chinese communities in most Pacific Island states today. China's first interest in the Pacific was mainly to protect Chinese workers in the 1800s and early 1900s. China protested the recruitment irregularities and further recruitment was only allowed after considerable negotiations. In 1875, China received permission to send permanent envoys to the Pacific to oversee the treatment of Chinese labourers (Yang, 2019).

In terms of trade, the Pacific region does not fall within the Chinese Maritime Silk Road. Thus, other than contract labour, China's contact with the Pacific traditionally remained limited. Early signs of China's foreign policy covering the Pacific region started to show around mid-1970s. While it is unclear exactly what led to this, it seems that China was motivated primarily by the desire to compete ideologically with the Soviet Union since China made decisions to establish diplomatic missions in Fiji and Western Samoa in 1976, around the same time as the Soviet Union's initiatives in the region (Fray, 2019). This was apparent by the public warnings that the Chinese Government made concerning Russian activities in the area (Sydney Morning Herald, 1977).

However, it was not until the late 1990s when China's influence in the region started to expand bolstered by generous financial assistance. For instance, in October 2000, China and the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) signed an agreement under which the Chinese government

donated US\$3 million to the PIF (Yang, 2011). In April 2004, China joined the South Pacific Tourism Organization (SPTO) as the first member state from outside the region while state visit diplomacy began as early as 1998 when the head of government of the Cook Islands, Geoffrey Henry, was received in Beijing by Vice-Premier Hu Jintao and Prime Minister Zhu Rongji for a one-week state visit (Seib, 2009).

China's increased interest was largely due to the diplomatic rivalry between Beijing and Taipei. When Taiwan lost its permanent membership seat in the United Nations Security Council to China in 1971, it turned to the emerging independent states of the Pacific seeking new friends. The Pacific leaders were receptive to Taiwan's diplomatic initiatives. Since then, most Pacific states have displayed fluctuating diplomatic recognition and shift in connection with Taiwan and China.

In addition to visit diplomacy, summit and transit diplomacy were also at play. For instance, Taiwan-Pacific Allies Summit was held in Palau in September 2006 where government officials from Pacific Island countries, including those with no official diplomatic relations with Taiwan, attended. Further, Taiwan's transit diplomacy attempted to demonstrate its sovereignty by passing through countries that had no diplomatic relations with Taiwan. While standard statements from Chinese diplomats usually state that China's aid to other countries has nothing to do with its relations with Taiwan, the reality is that for many years, perhaps the most important factor for China's growing involvement in the Pacific was to compete with Taiwan diplomatically (Yang, 2011).

In 2008, Taipei and Beijing reached a "diplomatic truce" which improved bilateral relations between the two countries and resulted in a pause in the above type of competition. However, since 2016, certain movements have indicated a return to the heightened cross-Strait competition in the Pacific Islands (Meick, 2018). For instance, in late 2017, Beijing reportedly cut off all state-run tour groups to Palau which was believed to be an unsuccessful attempt to pressure the Palau authorities to switch diplomatic recognition to Beijing (Radio New Zealand, 2017). The more recent and dramatic move was when China "convinced" both the Solomon Islands and Kiribati to sever long-standing ties with Taipei, bringing the total number of countries switching to Beijing to seven since 2016 and leaving Taipei with only Palau, Nauru, Tuvalu and the Marshall Islands as allies (ABC News, 2019).

From a geopolitics perspective, and other than Beijing's rivalry with Taipei, China's growing involvement in the Pacific is a consequence of its rising power and is aided by the political vacuum created by the traditional Western players in the region, in particular U.S. China's rise as a new world power (with the potential to challenge the global leadership role of the U.S.) is behind China's steadily growing involvement in many regions around the world, such as Asia, Africa and Latin America (Seib, 2009). Essentially, China aims to attain the status of a leading power in Asia-Pacific broadly, and therefore it wants to have influence in the Pacific (McDougall, 2016). So far as China's intentions with the Pacific is concerned, it has made it clear that it is not in the Pacific Islands to compete with anyone. In 2012, at the Pacific Islands Forum, Chinese Vice Minister for Foreign Affairs said:

We are here in this region not to seek any particular influence, still less dominance. We are here to work with the island countries to achieve sustainable development because both China and the Pacific Island countries belong to the ranks of developing countries. China's assistance to other developing countries is in the framework of south-south cooperation so our origin, our policy approach and our practice are very different from those of the traditional donor countries. We are ready to exchange views, to compare respective practice and where possible and feasible, we're also open to work with them for the benefit of the recipient countries, particularly the island countries here in this region. We are here to be a good partner with the island countries; we are not here to compete with anybody. (Xinhua; 2012)

China's policy toward the Pacific, which is comparable to its policy toward other regions, has a strong ideological element, that is, both China and the Pacific Island countries belonged to the Third World and it was their common interest to fight against imperialism (Yang, 2011). But there are mixed messages from China. As discussed in Chapter 1, a Chinese military officer claimed in early 2013 that the U.S. would be forced out of the Pacific by a rising China.

China's trade, aid, diplomatic, and commercial activity in the Pacific region has further intensified since 2006. According to Lowy Institute, China has dramatically increased its aid activities in the Pacific. Between 2006 and 2017, it has provided circa US\$1.5 billion in foreign aid to the Pacific Island countries through a mixture of grants and loans (Lowy Institute). As of 2017, China was the third largest donor to the Pacific, contributing 8% of all foreign aid to

the region between 2011 and 2017. Lowy Institute's data indicates that China provided circa US\$1.76 billion in foreign aid to the Pacific Islands region between 2010 to 2020 (Lowy Institute).

For the purposes of this thesis, especially the ensuing chapters, it is important to understand China's foreign aid program. According to the People's Republic of China (2011), Chinese bilateral foreign aid is provided in three forms, namely grants, interest-free loans administered through state finances, and concessional loans administered through China Eximbank. Each form of aid is employed for different kinds of support and according to the recipient country's financial management and situation.

Interest-free loans are usually provided for 20 years, which includes five years of use, a five-year grace period, and 10 years of repayment and are mainly used for public facilities and projects that "improve people's livelihood" in developing countries with relatively good economic conditions (People's Republic of China, 2011). The repayment terms can be renegotiated, and outstanding debts can be cancelled and converted into grants (Matthew and Brant, 2014).

Concessional loans are provided to fund larger projects which promise sound economic returns. The objective is to "promote economic development and improve living standards in developing countries" and to "boost economic cooperation between developing countries and China" (Matthew and Brant, 2014). An interesting key criterion is that "the borrowing country shall have sound diplomatic relations with the Chinese Government and shall be politically stable and economically sound, with debt servicing capacity and reliable contract performance record" (China Eximbank, 2011).

Grants are used for small and medium-size projects for social welfare, emergency humanitarian aid, and as other in-kind assistance (People's Republic of China, 2011).

From a geoeconomics perspective, China's demand for natural resources found in the South Pacific which includes fisheries, copper, minerals, gold, lumber, timber and hydrocarbons, is high. The desire to secure supplies of raw materials and sales markets are necessary to maintain China's rapid pace of economic growth. Bilateral trade between China and the Pacific Island countries surged since 2005. According to Zhang (2019), the trade volume

increased nearly 10-fold since 2005 reaching US\$8.2 billion in 2017 from US\$834 million in 2005. China's imports increased from US\$414 million in 2005 to US\$3.48 billion in 2017 and the number of Chinese tourists to the Pacific jumped from 3,969 in 2008 to 143,398 in 2017 (Zhang, 2019).

Covid-19 has created challenges for China and its growing influence in the Pacific region. While China has been active in the Pacific region with its Covid-19 diplomacy, it has received mixed responses from the Pacific Island countries and has not been able to outdo the support provided to the Pacific by its traditional partners (Zhang, 2020). The pandemic has breathed new life into the strategic competition in the Pacific as it has provided an opportunity for traditional and new players to compete for influence.

China's growing involvement in the Pacific has worried the traditional Western players who have exercised considerable influence in the Pacific since the colonial era. They have been concerned that the cheque book diplomacy rivalry between Beijing and Taipei is contributing to the instability of the region, and more importantly that China's rising influence is undermining the traditional Western influence in the region and poses a threat to the West (Yang, 2011). As Wesley-Smith and Smith (2021) noted that the concern today is not only that China has gained economic and diplomatic traction in a region long considered a Western strategic domain, but that "Beijing might use its growing influence to establish a military presence in the region".

Concerns about China are also reflected in a growing body of academic and think tank literature. Crocombe (2007) indicated that the Pacific Island countries could shift allegiances from the Western Alliance to Northeast Asia and claimed that Island states were part of a wider Asia-Pacific network that included military institutions. Hooper and Slayton (2011) signalled that the Chinese Navy could launch military assets to rescue threatened nationals in the Pacific Islands in the future, thus posing a direct threat to the U.S.' interests in the region.

It is important to note that this same academic world has often made generalisations about the Pacific Island countries by putting them in a singular category and describing them as "the fragile region", "the nuclear playground", "earth's empty quarter", the Pacific "doomsday scenario", "the hole in the Asia-Pacific doughnut", the "vulnerable" region, the "nonviable"

region, the “failed’ region”, “the Pacific paradox”, etc. (Fry, 2019). Thus, the scholars and think tanks have played a vital role in influencing the world views of the Pacific region which has somewhat contributed towards policy building by the traditional Western partners. The generalisations made about the Pacific Island countries have also contributed towards creating a global image of the Pacific people, not entirely a true reflection.

4. The Traditional Partners

China’s increasing presence in the Pacific region has troubled the traditional players (particularly the U.S., Australia and New Zealand) which has led them to create and announce their new foreign policy initiatives in the Pacific. These initiatives are primarily designed to deny China the ability to project power by sea or air over the ocean spaces surrounding the major players in the region. Other old partners (such as France, United Kingdom and Japan), new players (such as India, Korea, and Indonesia) and institutions like the European Union have also displayed increased interest in the region recently.

The rest of this Chapter will briefly examine the history and current engagement status of each traditional/major player in the region. The past and current standing of the traditional players are critical to understanding the nature of their relationship with Pacific Islands and whether this has any bearing on how the Pacific Island countries are responding to them during the rise of China in the region. The following discussions by itself will be inconspicuously indicative of the Pacific’s perspective and attitude towards their traditional partners.

United States

The U.S involvement in the Pacific grew around World War II due to its rivalry with Japan, its interest in China and its aspiration to increase trade and investment (Yang, 2011). By the Cold War years, the Pacific was known as the “American Lake” revealing U.S dominance and the Pacific’s strategic importance to it. It’s worth noting that one of the reasons given by U.S. to justify its presence in the Pacific was that the natives of the Islands preferred the U.S. government (Lattimore, 1945).

The U.S. interest in the Pacific declined post war due to absence of hostile influences, the distance of the region from actual and potential conflicts, the turmoil associated with decolonisation elsewhere, and other “distractions” of the Cold War (Dorrance, 1990). However, it is believed that it was largely because U.S. was careful to not challenge Australia and New Zealand’s leadership in the region. Pimont (1991) noted that while U.S. was determined to increase its involvement in the Pacific region in the late 1980s, in truth “it has been able, up to now, to entrust Australia with the role of defending Western interests in the zone”.

After the Cold War, U.S. closed all but two embassies in the Pacific and its State Department Office of Pacific Island Affairs; reduced diplomatic activities and development assistance in the region; withdrew its aid mission in Fiji; and directed most of the aid to three freely associated states of Micronesia over which it exerts predominant soft power (Yang, 2011). Currently, U.S. has its strongest foothold in the Micronesian subregion where it controls Guam and the Northern Mariana Islands, has compacts of free association with the Marshall Islands, Palau and the Federated States of Micronesia, and also has interests in Polynesia, where it possesses American Samoa.

The U.S. interest in the Pacific resurfaced with China’s increased engagement in the region. According to Kabutaulaka (2021), it prompted U.S. to “rebalance” its foreign policy focus from Europe and the Middle East to the Asia-Pacific via its “Asia-Pacific pivot” policy. The U.S., after announcing the Pivot in 2011, organised a series of high-level official visits; engaged more actively in multilateral diplomacy; and increased its strategic military deployment in addition to its aid, trade and investment ties (Wallis, 2017). It also opened a USAID Pacific Island Regional Office in PNG and a regional defence, environmental and labour hub at its embassy in Fiji (Wallis, 2017). Most significantly, the former Secretary of State, Hilary Clinton, attended the PIF meeting in Rarotonga in 2012 (Wallis, 2017). The U.S. has been supported by its allies, especially its quadrilateral partners (Australia, Japan and India) and has subsequently forged a trilateral alliance with Australia and Japan “that focuses on increasing influence in the Pacific Islands” (Kabutaulaka, 2021).

In 2019, U.S announced more than US\$100 million in assistance to the region under the Pacific Pledge of the Indo-Pacific Strategy. The U.S. government states that this assistance represents its

commitment to the Pacific Islands, which it considers an essential part of the dynamic and strategically located region. According to the U.S. government, under the Pacific Pledge, it aims to broaden its efforts to partner with the Pacific Islands on their most pressing challenges, including on economic and environmental resilience, maritime security, and good governance (U.S. Department of State).

In 2020, U.S. announced more than US\$200 million in new funding as part of the Pacific Pledge. This figure includes more than US\$78 million in new programming across the Indo-Pacific Pillars and US\$130 million in support for the region's response to COVID-19 pandemic (U.S. Department of State). According to the U.S. government, this assistance is in addition to the nearly US\$350 million that its agencies invest annually in projects, assistance, and operations to build a more prosperous future for people in the Pacific Island region (U.S. Department of State).

Europe

European countries generally seemed to have lost interest in the Pacific on the basis that the region offered no opportunities for big investment or trade in the short term, while the long-term strategies were seldom seen by politicians or businesspeople (Yang, 2011). As for United Kingdom, its influence in the Pacific region shrank considerably after World War II despite it being the most important external player in the 1800s and early 1900s. Notwithstanding being a major colonial power, Britain closed its embassies in Kiribati, Tonga and Vanuatu between 2004 to 2006, withdrew from the Pacific Community and the University of the South Pacific in 2004, and significantly reduced its aid to the Pacific Island countries (Yang, 2011).

France, on the other hand, repeatedly displayed keen interest in the Pacific. According to Yang (2011), France remained a Pacific power in return for resources, the need for nuclear testing, national prestige, the region's symbolic importance and regional security and economic interest. France resisted the independence movement and instead constitutionally, politically and economically integrated the French overseas territories with the metropole.

France' reluctance towards decolonisation of the Pacific sparked acrimonious comments from some Pacific leaders. For instance, Albert Maori Kiki of Papua New Guinea said that "it was time for the delegates from colonial governments to 'shut up' and let the Pacific Islanders get

on with their job”, while a Cook Islands representative commented that if France continued to object to the reforms then the Cook Islands would propose that the South Pacific Commission session be abolished altogether and the South Pacific Conference put officially in full charge of the Commission (Fray, 2019).

To date, France retains control of New Caledonia, French Polynesia, and Wallis and Futuna. Most of its aid to the region, while much higher than other donors, is directed to its territories. France residual interest in the rest of the Pacific Island countries diminished significantly when its nuclear weapons testing ended in 1996 (Yang, 2011). However, France is now steadily increasing its involvement in the Pacific to counter China’s growing presence to protect its sovereign, military and economic interests in the region. In 2016, France got New Caledonia and French Polynesia accepted as members of the PIF which boosted its status in the region. In 2014, it took a strong stance in favour of responding to climate change. It also launched the France–Oceania summit meetings which were held in 2004, 2006, 2009 and 2015 and involved all PIF countries.

France, in contrast to other Western players, adopted a more conciliatory approach towards Fiji after the 2006 coup by providing active support to the Melanesian Spearhead Group (Wallis, 2017). It has also strengthened its strategic cooperation with Australia. For instance, in 2006, it entered the Australia–France Defence Cooperation Agreement which came into force in 2009 (Wallis, 2017). In 2012, a Joint Statement of Strategic Partnership was built between Australia and France with special focus on the South Pacific (Wallis, 2017). In 2017, the Australia and France partnership was further deepened via the Joint Statement of Enhanced Strategic Partnership (Wallis, 2017).

Japan

Japan has a natural connection with the Pacific as it too is an island country in the Pacific region. Hoadley (1992) noted that “Japan regards itself as a natural member of the island Pacific by virtue of its proximity, insular geography and historical involvement”. After its defeat in World War II, Japan re-emerged in the Pacific in the 1970s by way of resource diplomacy. Japan made aid donations to the Pacific Islands to further its interest in the region’s resources such as minerals, timber and fisheries (whaling and driftnet fishing).

Japan's increased interest in the Pacific was also due to its strategy on nuclear waste dumping and an attempt to limit the Soviet Union's perceived expansionism in the region (Fry, 2019; Yang, 2011).

By the end of 1980s, Japan became one of the largest aid donors and further increased its aid in the 1990s. According to Yang (2011), Japan was more "evenhanded" compared to that of other traditional donors who predominantly donated aid to their own colonies, for example, France, U.S. and Australia. In 1987, Japan's then Foreign Minister, Tadashi Kuranari, announced the "Kuranari Doctrine", which was hailed as the first articulation of the main principles of Japan's South Pacific policy. The doctrine outlined five key principles of Japan's cooperation policy with the Pacific region. These principals were: respect for independence and autonomy; support for existing arrangements for regional cooperation; assistance in preserving political stability; provision of assistance to make the region more prosperous; and promotion of people-to-people exchanges (Kono, 2019).

While generally sharing cordial relationship, the Pacific Islands were concerned with Japan driftnet fishing practice of the late 1980s and claimed it threatened to seriously deplete the stocks of albacore tuna (Fry, 2019). Japan indicated its intention to continue driftnetting and called for scientific evidence for the claims concerning the impact of driftnetting in response to a resolution for a ban on driftnetting placed before the UN General Assembly in 1989. The UN Resolution 44/225 (1989) called for, amongst other things, a cessation of driftnetting in the South Pacific by 1 July 1991, and until such time as there were "appropriate conservation and management arrangements for South Pacific albacore tuna resources" (United Nations, 1990).

Japan has maintained a close link with the PIF since late 1980s. In late 1996, the Japanese government, together with the PIF, set up a Pacific Islands Centre in Tokyo to promote economic development in the region. Through the Centre, Pacific Islands Leaders Meeting (PALM), a series of summit-level meetings, are held once every three years between the Pacific leaders and Japan.

With China's growing influence in the region, Japan is cooperating with Australia, New Zealand and other liberal democracies to balance the growing weight of China. However,

according to Hayward-Jones (2015), Japan has not engaged in explicit chequebook diplomacy with China by dramatically increasing aid to the Pacific Islands. Instead, Hayward-Jones suggests that Japan has sought to position itself as the partner of choice and focuses on issues which matter to the region and where Japanese assistance can make the most difference.

Australia and New Zealand

Australia and New Zealand are two major residential players in the Pacific, and both occupy a special place in the Pacific due to their proximity and historical linkages. From colonial times, both Australian and New Zealand settlers wanted a British South Pacific or “Oceania for the Anglo-Saxons”. However, while New Zealand was concerned with gaining more territory, Australia placed emphasis on strategic considerations and the need for protection of Australian settlers in the region (Fry, 2019).

As for Australia, the geopolitics of the Pacific region have mattered to it since before its federation. This was mostly due to the Australian colonies’ proximity to the region, their vulnerability to penetration by potential hostile powers, and their distance from their coloniser, Britain. In 1872, the Victorian Parliament debated taking possession of South Pacific islands as dependencies, and in 1883, the Queensland Government attempted to annex Papua to prevent “imminent danger of annexation by a foreign power” (Wallis, 2017).

Australia has had a proprietorial attitude towards the Pacific from colonial times. Australia’s longstanding desire to manage the Pacific region was referred to as the Australasian Monroe doctrine by Otto von Bismarck in the late nineteenth century (Fry, 2019). This desire finally got recognised during Cold War. The essence of the Australasian Monroe Doctrine was the understanding that Australia would assume responsibility for the stability, order and development of the Pacific as a condition for unwelcome interests staying out of the region (Wesley, 2017).

The Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade states on its website that Australia has a close historical, political, economic, development, security and people-to-people links with the island countries and territories of the Pacific (DFAT). This closeness is reflected in the fact that Australia is the largest aid donor to the Pacific Island countries and a dominant defence partner.

Other than Australia's own hegemonic agenda over regional governance in the Pacific, as a pro-American ally, Australia is viewed as having the responsibility for managing security and diplomatic terms in the Pacific region on behalf of U.S., and the West in general (Fry, 2019). Australia's 2016 Defence White Paper specified that it has a "strategic interest in ensuring that no power hostile to Western interests establishes a strategic foothold in the region from which it could launch attacks on Australia or threaten allied access or its maritime approaches" (Wallis, 2017).

Despite being the region's leading aid donor and defence partner, Australia's anxiety about its dominance in the region persists and has intensified of late due to China's growing presence in the region. Wallis (2017) defends this anxiety by arguing that the Pacific Island states are increasingly engaging with external powers whose interests might be inimical to Australia. Australia is concerned about the effectiveness of Chinese aid, its links to local corruption, its potential for creating debt burdens and its potential military presence in the region (Varrall, 2021).

According to Varrall (2021), many in the Australian policy community "are convinced that it is China's ambition in the Pacific region to set up one or more military bases as part of a global strategy of force projection". To counteract these concerns and to ensure that Australia is Pacific Islands preferred partner, Australia has recently adjusted its policy with the Pacific 'Step-Up' initiative stating that the "Pacific is one of the highest priorities of the 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper" (DFAT, 2018).

Australia's concerns about China's rise in the region has a lot to do with how it views the Pacific Island countries. Australia perceives the Pacific region as vulnerable and weak due to its small size, low economic growth, general economic strength and governance challenges. According to Wesley-Smith (2007), Australian literature around governance in the Pacific Islands region gives the impression that "all island leaders are corrupt, malleable, self-serving and impulsive". With the exception of Polynesian states, Island states in Melanesia and Micronesia have, in the past, been labelled as "failing states". For example, the Australian Strategic Policy Institute categorised the Solomon Islands as a "failing state". This term was also used by the Australian government and academic commentators (Reilly, 2004). Australia now uses the term "fragile" in place of "failing states". For instance, Australia's 2017 Foreign

Policy White Paper dubbed the Pacific Island countries as fragile and asserted the challenges faced by the island countries were weak governance, corruption and vulnerability to economic and environmental shocks. The Australian Government's Department of Defence even funded a project called the "South Pacific Fragile State Project" to research and analyse on the key drivers of instability in the South Pacific. Australia makes its policy "solutions" necessary and inevitable even when it is detested by Pacific islanders and island leaders (Varrall, 2021).

Compared to Australia, New Zealand is geographically and culturally closer to the Pacific and is often seen as having a keen appreciation of Pacific Islands cultural sensibilities (Carrick, 2002). In fact, among all external players in the region, New Zealand shares the strongest cultural ties with the Pacific Island countries, which according to Yang (2011) is a crucial element of soft power. This could be attributed to New Zealand's almost 8.1 percent Pacific Islander population, on top of its Polynesian Maori ethnic population which is estimated to be at around 16.7 percent as of 30 June 2020 (Statistics New Zealand). New Zealand's large Maori and Pacific Islander population has generated a sense of *Tagata Pasifika*, that is, of "identity as a Pacific nation at all levels of social, cultural, and political involvement" (Defence and Trade Committee, 2003).

New Zealand's Foreign Affairs and Trade website calls New Zealand a Pacific country connected to the region by "culture, history, politics, people, language, and shared interests". It also states that New Zealand shares "personal ties, including family connections and the links forged through education, business, travel, and friendship" with the Pacific region. New Zealand's formal relationships with several Polynesian islands, that is, free association with Cook Islands and Niue, territorial authority over Tokelau and a special relationship with Samoa under a 1962 Treaty of Friendship, also plays an important role towards building a *Tagata Pasifika*.

New Zealand has used this Pacific identity to market itself internationally, especially to the U.S. For example, a New Zealand intelligence official was quoted as saying that "New Zealand is a more Pacific country than Australia and the latter isn't always attuned to Pacific developments". In 2018, the New Zealand government announced a significant change to its foreign policy in the Pacific via the 'Pacific Reset' initiative. The Pacific Reset comprises a

NZ\$714.2 million allocation to New Zealand's Official Development Assistance fund, with the Pacific as the major recipient, and 14 new diplomatic posts (Lati, 2021).

The New Zealand government insists that its Pacific Reset policy is not propelled by the rise of China in the region. However, Lati (2021) argues that an analysis of "related rhetoric and policy documents by the New Zealand Government" indicate that the "anxieties behind the Reset could not have been caused by any other actor in the region except China". Lati asserts that there is considerable circumstantial evidence of this and supports it with a report by Stanford University's Hoover Institution, namely, *Chinese Influence and American Interests: Promoting Constructive Vigilance*, which argues that New Zealand is "vulnerable to Chinese influence" and that "China appears ready to exploit New Zealand's pursuance of closer ties with it to subvert New Zealand's continued ability to independently shape its policy priorities" (Diamond and Schell, 2018).

Despite New Zealand seen as playing "good cop" and Australia "bad cop", these two countries have cooperated extensively on a range of security, diplomatic and economic issues in the region. For example, in 1997, New Zealand and Australia led a military Truce Monitoring Group to Bougainville, a secessionist province of Papua New Guinea (Hoadley, 2005). Further, in 1999, the governments of New Zealand and Australia, amongst others, deployed troops to East Timor to reinforce the process of independence from Indonesia (Hoadley, 2005). Whether or not these two regional players expressly admit, China's growing influence in the region has compelled them both to adjust their policies toward the Pacific region.

5. The Pacific Perspective – Missing

The analysis above reveals there is clearly a strategic competition taking place in the Pacific region triggered not only by the growing presence of China, but also India, Indonesia, Japan and Taiwan. The traditional partners are exhibiting fear over losing their influence in the Pacific which would be detrimental to their interests. As such, the dominant players (U.S., Australia and New Zealand) have taken steps to enhance their engagement in the Pacific via a perplexing array of U.S. "Pacific Pledge", Australia's "Pacific Step Up", and New Zealand's "Pacific Reset".

The readjustment of foreign policies of the traditional (and non-traditional powers) towards the Pacific Island countries and the rise of China in the region has garnered considerable dialogue by scholars in the academic world and generally. What remains missing is the Pacific perspective on the strategic competition in the region. Current literature on this topic lacks the views of the Pacific scholars and leaders. It lacks any in-depth analysis on how the Pacific Island countries are responding to the growing might of China, engaging with their traditional partners and managing the strategic competition in the region. It lacks investigation on the strategies and policies adopted and employed by the Pacific Island countries in dealing with the U.S.-China rivalry.

It is worth noting that such negligence is not an isolated event. There appears to be a history of snubbing the Pacific people and their views on matters that concern them the most. Fry (2019) discussed that there was a general acceptance of the Western idea that the norms concerning sovereign equality did not apply to those who were “child races”.

However, in the present situation, the exclusion of the Pacific perspective on the strategic competition in the region has resulted in inadequate studies on a crucial topic and is the vital missing link without which any discussion or studies on the topic is lacking. Afterall, it is the Pacific Island states who will play a decisive role in shaping the outcomes of the strategic competition. Therefore, the competition needs to be investigated and understood in the context of the Pacific Islands’ approaches and responses (Wallis, 2021). The ensuing chapters will help fill this gap.

CHAPTER 3

Pacific Regionalism

Pacific Island countries often use Pacific regionalism to pursue their interests. As Wesley-Smith (2021) argued, the collective effort of Pacific Island states has shown remarkable success in dealing with powerful external actors over the years, despite the apparent disadvantages of size, lack of resources and aid dependency. Early examples of the successes of Pacific regionalism in dealing with powerful outside players include preventing Japan from dumping nuclear waste in the deep ocean; banning driftnet fishing by distant-water fishing nations; “negotiating a tuna treaty that required the U.S. to change its stated position on the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea”; and countering “domestic legislation and take on a powerful domestic fishing industry lobby” (Tarai, 2015).

This chapter investigates how Pacific Islands are dealing with and responding to the rise of China and growing strategic competition at a regional (subregional) level. It examines how the Pacific Island countries are using their collective sovereignty and agency to manage the strategic competition in the region and asserting their views and interests in the face of a changing regional order. This chapter has four main sections. The first section of this chapter investigates Pacific Regionalism from a Pacific point of view. The chapter then explores the Pacific Island countries’ diplomatic strategies and security concerns. The third section focuses on economic impacts and development aid, while the final section analyses the findings of the chapter.

This chapter demonstrates that the Pacific Island countries are utilising their strength as a region to maximise gains from the strategic competition and rise of China in the region. It reveals that the Island states are using regionalism as a solution to their common problems by collectively choosing to diplomatically and economically engage with China with the aim to maximise profit. It also demonstrates that Pacific leaders are using their collective voice to refute the “China threat” narrative pushed by their traditional Western partners. Instead, they are enforcing their own narrative – the Blue Pacific – through the key regional institutions to address their common key issues using their collective sovereignty. This chapter reveals that Pacific regionalism has enabled the Island nations to benefit economically and diplomatically from China’s growing presence and the strategic competition while asserting their sovereignty and regional identity, which would otherwise have been difficult to accomplish by the Island states individually.

1. Pacific Regionalism – Pacific Viewpoint

Regionalism means different things to different people. It is important to examine the starting point of region building from a Pacific perspective. Macu Salato, the Fijian secretary-general of the South Pacific Commission from 1975 to 1979, claimed that South Pacific regionalism had its “first appearance in the world ... at the Sixth South Pacific Conference” in 1965 of the SPC21, in which Pacific Island leaders first challenged the right of colonial powers to direct the regional organisation without indigenous participation (Fry, 2019). Dr Salato contends that earlier regional thinking, in which Pacific islanders had no voice, has no standing.

Epeli Hau'ofa, former director of the Oceanic Centre for Arts and Culture at the University of the South Pacific, argued that there had been a network of connections across the Pacific for thousands of years via epic ocean voyages, exchange relationships and unifying Pacific Ocean that made Oceania a connected “sea of islands” rather than remote “islands in the sea”.

Ratu Mara, former Prime Minister of Fiji, argued that contemporary indigenous regional identity had its roots in ancient connections among Pacific Islanders and asserted that indigenous regional connections were “interrupted by colonialism, rather than being a product of colonialism” (Fry, 2019). In fact, it was Ratu Mara that coined the oft-cited phrase “Pacific Way” which has become the most significant and longstanding encapsulation of Pacific regionalism from a Pacific perspective. Although this phrase was originally formulated to have specific reference to the socio-political environment of Fiji, it has gained and retained significant cachet more widely and usually refers to shared ideas about solidarity and reciprocity, and the fostering and maintenance of kinship networks. According to Tarte (2014), “consultation and consensus” is the epitome of the ‘Pacific Way’ of diplomacy and when contested, Pacific states “band together and form alliances with similarly vulnerable states to increase their ability to appeal to global states’ sense of morality against the common challenge”.

PIF leaders in a 2014 report embraced Pacific regionalism as:

The expression of a common sense of identity and purpose, leading progressively to the sharing of institutions, resources, and markets, with the purpose of complementing national efforts, overcoming common constraints, and enhancing sustainable and inclusive development within Pacific countries and territories and for the Pacific region as a whole.

Meg Taylor (2015), the former PIF Secretary General, in an introductory comment stated:

[R]egionalism must be about improving the lives of the people of the Pacific.... Regionalism cannot be pursued for its own sake. There must be some tangible benefit that it brings about. If regionalism is not doing this, then the strategy must be thoroughly evaluated. (Taylor, 2015)

Meg Taylor's remarks about reevaluating the strategy in the event regionalism does not bring about tangible benefit is visible in the way Pacific regionalism has evolved in recent years to counter the heightened strategic competition in the region. Fry (2019) states that regionalism is reflected in the shared commitment among Pacific Island leaders who are developing new ways of projecting a "Pacific voice" in global diplomacy. The greatest change, or fundamental shift as stated by Fry and Tarte (2015), has come about since 2009. This was around the same time since China's involvement in the Pacific increased which in turn led other external powers boosting their engagement in the Pacific.

According to the former President of Kiribati, the region experienced a "paradigm shift" in ideas about how Pacific diplomacy should be organised, and on what principles it should operate (Tong, 2015). This change in thinking, or 'paradigm shift', has positioned the region to advance a quite different regional security narrative which is being conveyed thorough the various regional channels and institutions. The PIF, for one, has been instrumental during this current increasing geopolitical competition in the Pacific.

2. Diplomatic Strategies and Security Concerns

Key Institution - Pacific Islands Forum (PIF)

The key vehicle for Pacific regionalism is the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF). The PIF came into being in 1971 and consists of 18 countries: Australia, Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, French Polynesia, Kiribati, Nauru, New Caledonia, New Zealand, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Republic of Marshall Islands, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu. The PIF currently recognises 18 dialogue partners namely, Canada, People's Republic of China, Cuba, European Union, France, Germany, India, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, Republic of Korea, Malaysia, Philippines, Spain, Thailand, Turkey, United Kingdom and the United States. It organises meetings with these key Dialogue Partners at Ministerial level annually.

It has been through PIF that positions on nuclear testing, climate change, fisheries, and other security and/or environmental issues have been articulated and pushed in the international arena. The accomplishments of the PIF have often been credited to its overarching philosophy of the “Pacific Way” which according to Haas (1975) is a system of “unanimous compromise” where “everyone sacrifices something for the overall benefit of the whole and all decisions are made by consensus”.

The PIF has largely been responsible for assessing and constantly reassessing the regional approaches to the common interests and challenges faced by Pacific Islands, and to what extent those interests and challenges can be efficiently addressed regionally. The “Pacific Plan”, endorsed by PIF leaders through the Auckland Declaration of April 2004, is one example of the PIF trying to strengthen regional cooperation and integration, and to collectively respond to the many challenges confronting Pacific islands countries. The aim of the “Pacific Plan” was to enhance and stimulate economic growth, sustainable development, good governance and security for Pacific countries through regionalism. Though, the “Pacific Plan” was largely criticised for paying lip service to Pacific values and cultures and that it failed to address the needs of Pacific people. This was presumably because it was considered the brainchild of New Zealand due to its involvement.

In 2013, the PIF leaders reviewed the Pacific Plan in light of the future desired by Pacific Island people and to create an authentically Islander-centred development framework. Hence, in 2014, the new Framework for Pacific Regionalism was set up and aimed at streamlining the regional agenda, supporting political conversations and initiatives that address key strategic issues, promoting an inclusive regional policy development process and encouraging prioritisation of the PIF leaders’ agenda to ensure that leaders have the time and space to drive these policy initiatives forward. According to Howes and Sen (2021), the Framework for Pacific Regionalism was set up as a new process for the identification of priorities and their endorsement by PIF leaders.

To date, the work of PIF is guided by the Framework for Pacific Regionalism. According to the PIF website, the Framework for Pacific Regionalism is the lens through which the PIF Secretariat supports the PIF to realize its vision for the Pacific region.

Other key Institutions – PIDF, MSG and PSIDS

From 2009, an explosion of institution-building occurred, which according to Fry and Tarte (2015) has been described as the “new Pacific diplomacy”. The most significant regional institutions,

other than the PIF, are the Pacific Islands Development Forum (PIDF), the revived Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) and the Pacific Small Island Developing States (PSIDS). The Pacific leaders have always had a clear vision that it should “chart its own course” (Tong, 2015) and this call for regional self-determination is reflected in the creation and revival of these institutions.

By way of a brief background, the victory of all three institutions can be attributed to Fiji. Fiji’s Bainimarama regime worked persistently to reframe Pacific regionalism since its suspension from the PIF in 2009. Fiji, employing its status of the hub of the Pacific, dedicated itself to the development of an effective regional architecture based on the principles of self-determination and inclusion of all Pacific Islanders. Fiji implemented this regional strategy by hosting the Engaging with the Pacific Leaders (EWPT) meetings which began in 2010 and was open to all Pacific Island states, excluding Australia and New Zealand. The EWPT provided an alternative regional forum based on the “Pacific way of talanoa, with focus on sustainable development, decolonisation, climate change and the ‘green economy’”. This struck a chord with the Pacific leaders (Fry, 2019) who were increasingly getting frustrated with the PIF’s failure to adequately represent their interests in global forums.

The Pacific Islands Development Forum (PIDF) - launched in 2013, was a result of EWPT. One of the main motivations for the creation of PIDF was the desire for self-determination. Fiji’s then Interim Prime Minister, Frank Bainimarama, in his opening speech stated:

It is not a question of prestige or establishing yet another talkfest, it is about creating an organisation that is more attuned to our development needs as Pacific countries. It is about creating an organisation that is relatively free of interference from outsiders.... Why do we need a new body, a new framework of cooperation? Because the existing regional structure for the past four decades—the Pacific Islands Forum—is for governments only and has also come to be dominated only by a few.

It was reported that China, along with the governments of Russia and Kuwait, provided financial support to the PIDF, with China providing a financial contribution towards setting up the PIDF Secretariat (Fry and Tarte, 2015). Fiji’s Frank Bainimarama at the China-Fiji 40th Anniversary Diplomatic Relations Symposium opening in November 2015 said:

China’s assistance in establishing the Pacific Islands Development Forum is especially appreciated. Because it understands our desire for a more inclusive framework that

brings Pacific Islanders together to determine their own futures, free from outside interference. (The Government of Fiji, 2015)

Reports proclaimed the PIDF as pathbreaking in Pacific regionalism for its inclusivity. For example, the Fiji Sun newspaper, on its front page, reported “we are all Equal Now” as the PIDF launch not only included states and nonstate but also Pacific Island administrations in dependent territories (Pratibha, 2013). A key principle animating the work of PIDF is self-determination. According to the PIDF charter, the “Pacific should be governed by and for Pacific Islanders” and external powers can participate in PIDF deliberations as observers (PIDF, 2015).

The Pacific Small Island Developing States Group (PSIDS) - a New York-based grouping at the United Nations was set up in the 1990s due to the need to raise funds for projects around climate change adaptation and mitigation, renewable energy and pollution. However, since 2009 it has taken on a dramatically new diplomatic role for Pacific Island states to the point where “it has all but replaced the PIF as the primary organising forum for Pacific representations at the global level” (Fry and Tarte, 2015). The PSIDS gained international recognition for its role for representing the “Pacific voice” and was instrumental in the renaming of the Asia grouping as Asia-Pacific Small Island Developing States (or Asia-Pacific group in shorthand) (Fry, 2015). The PSIDS is arguably the most important part of the way in which Pacific Island countries engage at the United Nations.

The Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) - a subregional body was established in July 1986. The group has five full members, namely Fiji, Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea (PNG) and nationale Front de liberation kanak et socialiste (FLNKS) New Caledonia. The economies of these member States, fuelled by resources, tourism and agriculture, are the most vibrant within the wider Pacific. MSG was reinvigorated and revamped by Fiji, and to some extent PNG, in 2009. It is a major forum embraced by all Melanesian countries for subregional integration and for diplomacy on decolonisation (Fry and Tarte, 2015). The MSG has been enormously successful with many significant achievements such as attaining free movement of professional workers and free trade in goods and services. In 2007, MSG membership signed the Agreement Establishing the Melanesian Spearhead Group and deposited it with the United Nations to secure recognition as a subregional organisation. In 2008, MSG’s secretariat building was opened in Port Villa funded by the government of the People’s Republic of China (Cain, 2015).

The MSG Secretariat began discussions with China on possible partnership arrangements during a meeting held in Port Villa in December 2020. MSG Secretariat acting director general George Hoa'au claims China is willing to be part of the development aspirations of the MSG and that given all MSG members now recognise the "One China Policy", the Secretariat is looking to upscale bilateral relations to a multilateral approach in areas of mutual interests at subregional level, including climate change (Cain, 2015).

All these key institutions now cover almost every aspect of governance including economic development, trade promotion, resource protection, the environment, natural disasters, human rights, security, conflict management, cultural heritage, sustainable human development and decolonisation (Fry and Tarte, 2015). According to Fry (2019), apart from the European model, this is a significant regional diplomatic and governance system by any measure.

Some observers have emphasised China's influence as being a key cause behind these developments while O'Keefe (2015) expresses that:

[W]hile the heightened global interest in the Pacific — particularly from China — acted as a facilitating environment for some of these developments, the driving force is provided by Pacific agency. (O'Keefe, 2015)

Key Strategy - Blue Pacific

China's rise in the region has presented the island states with an alternative as they are no longer pressed to work with their traditional partners. However, in order to effectively promote their key issues (such as climate change, self-determination, ocean management, sustainable development and humanitarian assistance) and to counter the dominant narratives used by their traditional Western partners, Pacific leaders are utilising their collective sovereignty and agency under Pacific regionalism. According to Tarte (2021), the Pacific states have become more "assertive, confident, independent and innovative" in their foreign policies and are increasingly willing to push back the traditional development partners' narratives and "leverage their combined political, economic and moral weight to influence international and regional arrangement".

The Blue Pacific narrative is one such initiative. The Pacific Island countries have employed the Blue Pacific narrative to assert their sovereignty and highlight issues that are important to them. The Blue Pacific outlines an expanded concept of security which includes human security,

humanitarian assistance, environmental security and regional cooperation in building resilience to disasters and climate change in addition to other important issues such as increased economic returns from fisheries and maritime surveillance, and information and communication technology.

The Blue Pacific theme was promoted by the Samoan Government in 2017 at the Apia PIF meeting. The Pacific leaders embraced the “Blue Pacific: Our Sea of Islands” theme and this new narrative was very quickly adopted in PIF policies and communications. In a speech, former Prime Minister of Samoa Tuilaepa Sailele Malielegaoi said the Blue Pacific is designed to encourage Pacific Island states to act as a “Blue Continent” based on their “shared stewardship of the Pacific Ocean”.

Kabutaulaka (2021) claims that it gives the Pacific Islanders the conceptual tools to assert themselves in regional and global discussions. Kabutaulaka also claims that the Blue Pacific has played a central role to dealing with great power competition in the region and provides a counternarrative for Pacific regionalism and a strategy to counter the dominance of global powers. Samoan Prime Minister and the then chair of the PIF, Tuilaepa Lupesoliai Sailele Malielegaoi, at the 48th meeting in Apia in September 2017 said:

The Blue Pacific will strengthen the existing policy frameworks that harness the ocean as a driver of transformative socio-cultural, political and economic development of the Pacific ... it gives renewed impetus to deepening Pacific regionalism.

Fry (2019) claims that there are 4 “strands” of the Blue Pacific, namely it is about “promoting Oceanic identity and solidarity around stewardship of the ocean”; it promotes an “image of solidarity and connectedness in the idea of the reclamation of an Oceanic continent”; it is “clearly talking about the assertion of regional self-determination”; and finally, it is “signalling an identity”. The Deputy Secretary General of PIF Cristelle Pratt in 2019 made the following remarks about the Blue Pacific:

The Blue Pacific narrative recognises our strategic value as custodians of some of the world’s richest biodiversity and marine and terrestrial resources. It emphasises our collective stewardship of the Pacific Ocean to ensure peace, protect the dignity of our way of life and secure the livelihoods and wellbeing of all Pacific Islands

communities.... The Blue Pacific narrative is about our Pacific people and emphasizes our long history of creating innovative solutions to our unique problems.... The Blue Pacific narrative is the embodiment of our collective aspirations and how together we can achieve great things for our Pacific people and for our place.

The Blue Pacific is arguably the most significant strategy employed by the Pacific Island countries to respond to and manage the great power competition in the region. The PIF have not shied away from asserting this. In fact, during the *Strengthening the US-Pacific Islands Partnership* dialogue in Fiji in 2019, the Deputy Secretary General of PIF not only confirmed that the Pacific Islands countries and the U.S. have different approaches to this new phase of great power competition, but also encouraged that the U.S. move away from its narrative that portrays Pacific Island countries as “fragile states” that need to be saved by U.S. in partnership with Australia and New Zealand.

This paradigm shift in Pacific diplomacy, triggered by the growing strategic competition in the region, has positioned the region to advance a different regional narrative to that of the traditional dominant players in the region - the Blue Pacific. Essentially, the Pacific Islands, through the Blue Pacific narrative, are cleverly utilizing the current strategic competition in the region to leverage their status from small states to large oceanic states. The Island states are demonstrating strong determination to collectively chart their own path in the face of current and future geopolitical, economic, social and climatic shifts. The region’s message is clear that it is no longer prepared to stand by and allow its future to be shaped and directed by others. The rise of China in the region has played an instrumental role in this. Pacific leaders recognise they now have options and therefore can successfully present and promote their own key issues using their collective sovereignty and agency.

Key Principle - Sovereignty and Self Determination

The one thing that stands out from the above discussions on key regional institutions and the Blue Pacific narrative is the significance of collective sovereignty of the Pacific Island countries. As such, it warrants a separate discussion. While each Pacific Island state has unique characteristics that bear on its foreign policies, the principal approach and key strength of the Pacific Island states in dealing with the heightened strategic competition is their collective sovereignty. Fry (2019) emphasises that Pacific leadership is focused on “regional self-determination”. Essentially, it is the collective sovereignty that the Pacific Islands are utilising, via the various key regional

institutions and the Blue Pacific narrative, to preserve their autonomy which is at the forefront of all their foreign policies and objectives.

A good example of the Pacific Islands successfully asserting their collective sovereignty was the establishment of the South Pacific Forum, now known as PIF, because of their desire to map themselves into regional and international politics and highlight issues they saw as pertinent to the region (Kabutaulaka, 2021). The Pacific Island countries also successfully asserted their collective sovereignty by rallying around issues such as decolonisation, anti-nuclear weapons testing (Firth, 1986; Maclellan, 2017; Regnault, 2005; Walker and Sutherland, 1988) and resource management, especially tuna fisheries (Hanich et al., 2014). The former Prime Minister of Cook Islands, Henry Puna, said:

[T]he time is right that we take on a more concerted effort, as a region, to define ourselves on our own terms. Our collective interests are being pressured and shaped towards a new Pacific Order — one that won't necessarily meet the expectations of others — or the perceptions of outsiders. What is important is that we choose what's best for us. We have the ability to define what is good, and we have the right to take commanding ownership of our future. (Puna, 2012)

An Oxfam Report indicated that the Blue Pacific basically “cements a powerful narrative of self-determination based on Pacific values” while capturing the growing geostrategic and economic significance of the region. As discussed above, the Blue Pacific is ultimately an assertion of the regional self-determination principle within the PIF. This is reflected in Meg Taylor’s comments during her August 2018 address to the University of the South Pacific:

The Blue Pacific narrative helps us to understand, in our own terms, based on our unique customary values and principles, the strategic value of our region. It guides our political conversations towards ensuring we have a strong and collective voice, a regional position and action, on issues vital to our development as a region and as the Blue Pacific continent. (Taylor, 2018)

As highlighted above, the key principle animating the work of PIF, PIDF, MSG and PSIDS is self-determination. For instance, MSG’s commitment to independence is displayed by the Melanesian states strong stance in relation to continuing decolonisation issues. One of the defining features of the MSG is that it supports the Front de Libération Nationale Kanak et Socialiste (FLNKS), a political movement in New Caledonia campaigning for independence from France. The MSG

oversees the implementation of the Noumea Accords and has a dedicated unit within its secretariat focused on progressing Kanak self-determination, which was established in 2012 (Forau and Cain, 2013). In a speech to the UN in 2017, a representative of the MSG said:

The Melanesian Spearhead Group has taken on the daunting task as the matter of decolonisation is and will remain a political challenge for its members in the years to come. The MSG 2038 Plan make specific mention of the issue and Decolonisation as a critical issue that the group will need to address with some urgency. There is no doubt Mr Chairman that we will stumble and err, but to not act will not bring an end to colonialism in our sub-region, not in the world for that matter.

PIDF and PSIDS have also played active roles in respect of French Polynesia being inscribed on the United Nations list of non-self-governing territories.

Pacific regionalism is providing an important layer of collective sovereignty, in addition to national sovereignty, to Pacific Island states on the global platform. The application of collective sovereignty via Pacific regionalism is serving individual states well by bolstering state power and national interest in global negotiations. Pacific Island countries are leveraging the intense geopolitical competition to assert their collective sovereignty and views on self-determination by choosing to form diplomatic relations and economic ties with whomever they want.

Key Issue - Climate Change

At the heart of Pacific Island countries' diplomatic assertiveness is the issue of climate change. Climate change is an issue that Pacific Island countries see as their most important existential threat as they are at the forefront of climate change impacts. According to PIF, climate change is the "single greatest challenge faced by Pacific Island countries" (PIF Secretariat, 2018). Pacific Island countries have taken leadership on this issue since many global powers have not prioritised climate change. According to the Boe Declaration, "climate change remains the single greatest threat to the livelihoods, security and wellbeing of the peoples of the Pacific" (PIF Secretariat, 2018). Meg Taylor, the former Secretary General of PIF, declared that "the highest priority for our region is climate change mitigation and adaptation". In another interview, Dame Taylor said:

If you look at the Pacific Rim countries, you've got to ask yourself, who is really committed to the one issue, the most important issue that faces this region: climate change? (Smith and Lim, 2019)

On 5 November 2021, in an innovative attempt to convey the message, the Foreign Minister of Tuvalu filmed a speech for the 26th Conference of the Parties (COP26) standing knee-deep in the ocean to show how the nation is vulnerable to global warming. During the Cop26 Summit in November 2021, Fiji's Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama made strong statements where he said, "If there is any one issue we must agree on, it's climate" and that the "science is clear - no city, no community, and no ecosystem will be spared from the reckoning that lies beyond 1.5C of warming, including our ocean, the lungs of the planet".

Wesley-Smith (2021) argues that in light of the escalating great power competition in the region, which is likely to increase the climate change threat, the Pacific Islands' concerns about climate change are fully justified given their relatively fragile ecosystems, vulnerability to extreme weather events and rising sea levels.

The issue of climate change was one of the main inspirations behind the establishment or revival of the key regional and subregional institutions such as PIF, PDIF, MSG and PSIDS. The Blue Pacific initiative and the Boe Declaration on Regional Security were adopted in 2017 and 2018, respectively, with Pacific states vowing to take a collective approach to regional development and security underpinned by conservation, sustainable development and an inclusive concept of security (Zhang and Diamanam, 2021). PIF countries are also in the process of developing the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent.

A key value of the PDIF is "a shared and enduring commitment to Green-Blue Pacific economies, sustainable development and especially poverty eradication" (PIDF, 2017). From the beginning, PDIF has been concerned about climate change and its regional impacts. PDIF's strategic plan lists its first objective as "advocating the very real and pressing significance of climate change for the lives and livelihoods of Pacific Islands and Pacific Islanders" (PIDF, 2017). Pacific leaders have also played a key role in shaping the 2015 Paris Agreement, in particular the addition of a limit of 1.5 degrees Celsius above preindustrial global temperatures to the agreement, even if this was only included as an "aspirational target" (Carter, 2018).

The Pacific Island countries are adamant that climate change is the most important security issue. The metropolitan countries on the other hand, especially Australia and U.S., insist that the central security issue of the region is geographic concerns, particularly China's growing influence. As such, Pacific Islands and the dominant Western powers in the region differ greatly on what is the regions central security issue. During the PIF leaders meeting in Tuvalu in August 2019, these

differences came to the forefront. According to Kabutaulaka (2021), “Australia has emerged as, at best, hypocritical” and was widely criticised for watering down the language in the communiqué, with Pacific leaders calling for urgent action on climate change (Lyons, 2019b). Australia had signed the Boe Declaration as a member state of the PIF but soon after approved the development of giant new coalfields in the Galilee Basin of Queensland, and continues to be the world’s largest coal exporter.

In December 2018 the former Prime Minister of Tuvalu Enele Sopoaga called on Australia to include climate change action as part of its “Pacific Step-Up”. He warned that Canberra’s inaction could undermine its Pacific pivot, saying:

We cannot be regional partners under this Step-Up initiative— genuine and durable partners—unless the government of Australia takes a more progressive response to climate change ... They know very well that we will not be happy as a partner, to move forward, unless they are serious. (Dziedzic, 2018)

In September 2020, Solomon Islands senior ambassador Robert Sisilo told the Australian federal parliament, “Lest we forget, climate change, not COVID-19, not even China, is the biggest threat to our security’.

China, on the other hand, and despite being the world’s largest investor in coal production, has been under less pressure and considered a development partner by the Pacific Island countries. The former French Polynesian President Edouard Fritch at an interview at the 2018 PIF said:

The discussions we had this morning with our partners showed that the Indo-Pacific framework is one that everyone is using, guiding their interventions in the Pacific. Within this Indo-Pacific framework, there is certainly the problem of global warming, but there are other problems that are just as important: the security of populations, maritime security, national security for each country and also regional security. Today, Pacific countries want more security and so are looking to all their partners, whether it’s China or the United States.

China’s rise in the Pacific has clearly offered the Island countries with an alternative diplomatic and development partner particularly since the Island states have a history of standoffs largely in respect of climate change with their traditional Western partners, particularly Australia. For

instance, in 1997 during the Rarotonga SPF meeting held to discuss binding emissions targets as part of a climate protocol, Tuvalu's former Prime Minister Bikenibeu Paeniu said:

Australia dominates us so much in this region. For once, we would have liked to have got some respect.

In the not-so-distant past, in 2015 prior to the PIF meeting at which the Pacific position for the Paris conference on climate change was to be discussed, former president of Kiribati was reported to have issued "ultimatum", declaring that "we cannot negotiate this, no matter how much aid. We cannot be bought on this one because it's about the future" (Fry, 2019).

The Pacific leaders' view on China is strikingly positive and starkly opposite to their view of Australia. For example, Vanuatu's former Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade Ralph Regenvanu described China as:

[A] great partner, I think far more respectful of us as government-to-government diplomatic representatives than Australia. They don't presume like Australia. They can be just as forceful, but Australia has got the gold medal for that one.

The Pacific Islands' strategy of using their collective voice via Pacific regionalism on the climate change issue and using the rise of China as an alternative diplomatic and economic partner has already proven fruitful. The Pacific Islands' strong stance that climate change, not "China threat", is the region's critical security concern has forced the traditional Western powers to relook at their approach on climate change. For instance, the U.S. officially re-joined the Paris Agreement in February 2021. Further, on day one of the COP26 to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, President Biden made clear that the outcome in Glasgow "must raise global ambition during this decisive decade of climate action to preserve our shared future" and relayed U.S.'s goals to create a carbon pollution-free power sector by 2035 and reach net-zero emissions economy-wide by no later than 2050.

The Government of New Zealand in November 2019 passed a Zero Carbon Act to help reduce global warming and lessen the impacts of climate change on vulnerable communities. China has pledged support to the Pacific in response to natural disasters and in recent years, climate change has become a progressively significant part of China-Pacific relations featuring high-level visits between the two sides.

Australia too has made structural changes within its Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) establishing an Office of the Pacific to develop even closer ties with the Pacific (DFAT 2018). However, not much seems to have changed in respect of the climate change “standoff”. The new Office of the Pacific at DFAT is seen as representing very little in terms of a real shift in conceptualisation of, or approach towards, the Pacific Islands region with no mention of, amongst other things, climate change. Moreover, while Australia announced it would commit AU\$500 million before the August 2019 PIF meeting in Tuvalu, during the event, Australia was reluctant to agree on emissions reductions and coal use. The then Prime Minister of Tuvalu Enele Sopoaga remarked that while Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison was concerned about saving his economy in Australia, he was concerned about saving his people in Tuvalu (Clarke, 2019).

3. Economic Impact

Wesley-Smith (2021) argues that the most significant impacts of escalating big-power competition for Pacific Island countries are economic, not political. There is no doubt that the traditional and new players in the region have increased the flows of trade, aid and investment in the Pacific. This has boosted the agency of the Pacific Island countries and given the Pacific leaders choice. China’s heightened interest in the region offers the Pacific leaders the opportunity to break the monopoly of control exercised by a few Western powers for many years. The Pacific leaders have generally welcomed China and its assistance to the region despite the traditional players insisting that China is a security threat.

China has become the second largest trading partner for the region as a whole and Chinese companies and individuals are significant investors in resource extraction and retail across the Pacific. According to Lowy Institute, China committed a total of US\$1.78 billion in aid to at least eight Pacific Islands since 2006 in addition to providing financial support for regional organisations and funding scholarships for some 1,400 Pacific Island students to study in China (Lowy Institute, 2019; Zhang and Marinaccio, 2019). In 2016 alone, China’s committed aid to the region amounted to AU\$277.44 million, the second largest behind Australia (Lowy Institute, 2019).

Since 2006, China has pledged to support the Pacific Island countries in responding to natural disasters, promised more support in environmental protection and natural disaster prevention and mitigation, and made climate change the top agenda for one of its Forums where a separate panel was organised for the first time on environmental protection and climate change (Zhang, 2020).

According to Zhang (2020), China's climate change aid to the Pacific falls into three categories. The first category comprises "donations of funds and climate change mitigation-related materials, especially in the wake of natural disasters". For example, after the 2018 Cyclone Gita in Tonga, the Chinese government, the Red Cross Society of China and the Chinese embassy respectively donated US\$500,000, US\$100,000 and 40,000 Pa'anga (US\$19,360). The second category is China's assistance to the Pacific Island countries in "constructing climate change-related infrastructure". For example, China's Hunan Construction Engineering Group built a hydropower plant in Fiji's Somosomo village between September 2013 and March 2017 which was financed by Chinese grants to the value of US\$7 million. Another example is the Chinese government funding US\$14 million in grant aid to establish the Maritime Training and Marine Research Ocean Campus of the National University of Samoa in November 2015, expected to provide improved facilities for Samoan climate-change related marine research. The third type of climate change aid to the Pacific Islands is "capacity training through government scholarships and short-term training programs". For example, in 2019 the Department of Climate Change at China's Ministry of Ecology and Environment organised a South-South cooperation training course in Beijing on climate change, and green and low-carbon development which was attended by the representatives from Samoa, Fiji and Papua New Guinea.

Despite panic and hyperventilation from Western partners with a nuance that Pacific Island countries forgo the opportunity for economic assistance from China, most, if not all, the Pacific leaders have indicated how valuable the Chinese loans are. For example, Papua New Guinea's former Minister for Foreign Affairs Rimbink Pato said that "Papua New Guinea would continue looking for aid and loans from nations like China, particularly to develop infrastructure." However, while the Pacific Islands continue to form productive relations with China, they are also maintaining their links with their traditional Western partners. The Pacific leaders recognise that growing strategic competition in the region is causing their metropolitan partners to become amenable to their needs. Vanuatu's former Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade Ralph Regenvanu described China's increased engagement in the region:

It has been good for us. The blow-up has made Australia much more interested. They have committed to build the police college for us. They have committed to picking up the national security standard. They have talked about being much more interested in improving work strategies. They have been talking about improving infrastructure. So, great. (Duffield, 2018)

Basically, to curb China's rise in the Pacific since the Pacific leaders did not buy into the "China threat", the older dominant actors, especially Australia, New Zealand and U.S., are increasing their resource commitment to the region. For example, Australia has proposed to support infrastructure development in the Pacific and in 2018 a proposal was made for the Australian Parliament to approve additional resources and powers for Australia's Export Finance and Insurance Corporation and AU\$2 billion for a new Australian Infrastructure Financing Facility for the Pacific (Varrall, 2021).

Australia jointly announced the Papua New Guinea Electrification Partnership at APEC aiming to provide 70 per cent of PNG with access to electricity by 2030 (Varrall, 2021). Australia also announced AU\$9 million over four years for expanding Australia's Cyber Cooperation Partnership with the Pacific and has committed AU\$2 billion to the Pacific Maritime Security Program over the next 30 years. Moreover, Australia has proposed education initiatives which includes "scholarships for Pacific students to study in Australian secondary schools"; increasing the number of "scholarships under the Australia Pacific Training Coalition"; and an "expansion of the Australia-Pacific BRIDGE School Partnerships for teacher training" (Varrall, 2021).

The Pacific Islands are leveraging the strategic competition to negotiate deals and agreements for their benefit. For example, the Parties to the Nauru Agreement (countries include Solomon Islands, Tuvalu, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Papua New Guinea, Nauru, Federated States of Micronesia and Palau) have been highly successful in implementing innovative ideas in fisheries management within their national waters. This has translated into dramatic increases in revenue to the member countries. According to an article in the Guardian, the Nauru Agreement has allowed the tiny countries to collectively negotiate access to their waters by foreign fishing vessels, a move that has generated an additional \$500m a year in revenue (Field, 2021). On 1 December 2007, the Palau arrangement for the management of Western Pacific Purse Seine Fishery-Management Scheme (or the VDS Management Scheme) was put in place restricting vessel numbers to a program of limited days fished within the waters of the PNA (Shanks, 2010).

Since 2002, PIF and PSIDS have devoted a lot of time and effort to negotiating trade agreements such as Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs), the Pacific Island Countries Trade Agreement (PICTA), PICTA trade in services, and Pacific Islands Agreement on Closer Economic Relations (PACER Plus). Most Pacific Island countries have now signed the PICTA and the PACER and are negotiating EPAs with the European Union. The MSG Trade Agreement (MSGTA), originally

signed in 1993 to promote trade and regional integration in Melanesia, is another success story. The MSGTA has been reviewed twice by its members to strengthen and improve its implementation, and in January 2013 a significant milestone was reached with the opening up of the largest regional market in the Pacific (Marawa, 2015). While the Pacific Islands have rejected the “China threat”, they are welcoming economic assistance from both China and their traditional partners. According to Wesley-Smith (2021), these resources would probably not have been forthcoming without the emerging great power competition.

4. Analysis

This Chapter reveals that the Pacific Island countries are using their collective sovereignty and agency through Pacific regionalism to strengthen their diplomatic and economic ties with the competing countries with the goal to maximize benefits. The Pacific Island countries are aware of their smallness and remoteness, including their differences based on different ethno groupings. They are aware of the challenges they would face if they were to make any significant impact by going alone against the big powers. Thus, naturally, Pacific Islands are emphasising and relying on regional cooperation as a means for protecting their sovereignty and security during great power competition.

This chapter reveals that Pacific leaders are employing Pacific regionalism to overcome the challenges that come with being a small remote state and are using their collective voice to strengthen their international standing. This chapter highlights the key regional/subregional institutions, namely PIF, PDIF, MSG and PSIDS; the key strategy, namely the “Blue Pacific”; the key principle, namely sovereignty/self-determination; and the key security concern, namely climate change.

The Pacific leaders are demonstrating their cooperation, common concerns and interests through the key regional/subregional institutions. They are using these regional/subregional mechanisms to increase their capabilities and address their common problems as they recognise that by joining force, they acquire the agency to effectively implement their policies and better cope with the strategic competition in the region, most importantly to benefit from it. This approach is valuable for the small remote Pacific nations in that it provides a platform for them to compensate for their innate disadvantages in size and limited range of resources.

Pacific Island countries are adopting “institutional hedging” which according to Oba (2019) is a “state’s hedging behaviour that manifests through multilateral institutions and a type of hedging effort performed by states that use multilateral institutions to compete for power and influence in international politics”. Even the PIF former secretary general suggested that “perhaps the time is now right to leverage the geopolitical interests and opportunities that are available to us to advocate for and secure our maritime interests into perpetuity” (Taylor, 2018).

The chapter unveils the “Blue Pacific” as the key strategy employed by the Pacific leaders as a counternarrative to the “China threat”. Under the “Blue Pacific” banner, the Pacific Islands are jointly pursuing their common interests and concerns with the aim to benefit from the rise of China and growing strategic competition while emphasizing their strategic autonomy, regional identity and Pacific values.

The Pacific leaders are also successfully using regional cooperation to negotiate trade deals and agreements and are seeking to benefit from their collective voice and efforts as it enhances their bargaining positions vis-a-vis the larger economies.

The findings of this chapter essentially reveals that the Pacific leaders are using Pacific regionalism to benefit economically and diplomatically from China’s growing presence and the strategic competition in the region. Their collective agency is empowering them to successfully pursue their common interests and address their common security concerns without having to compromise their regional identity and Pacific values - the “Pacific Way”.

CHAPTER 4

Case Study - Fiji

In the presiding chapter, it was established that the Pacific Island interests are best pursued through a combination of regional and sub-regional channels. These interests are mostly common regional interests. However, some interests are unique to particular countries and are more specific. This chapter investigates the foreign policies and strategies of Fiji in response to the strategic competition and rise of China. Fiji, which falls in the subregion on Melanesia, has been chosen as a case study because it is a key player in the region and several of its characteristics make it a heavy weight in the Pacific. For instance, Fiji has the second largest population, second biggest economy, third largest land size in the region and is in the middle of the South Pacific. Fiji is a regional hub and hosts many international and regional organisations. China's rise in the Pacific and the ensuing geostrategic U.S.-China competition has meant Fiji has received more attention in recent years than in the past.

This chapter highlights the strategies adopted by Fiji as it sees itself at the centre of the great power rivalry. The chapter is divided into four main sections. The first section explores Fiji's background. The second sections examine Fiji's diplomatic strategies while the third section focuses on economic impacts and development aid. The final section analyses the findings of this case study. The aim of this chapter is to also provide a broader analysis on how the sub-region of Melanesia is dealing with the rise of China and the heightened strategic competition in the region.

This Chapter demonstrates that Fiji has approached the strategic competition as an opportunity to forward its own interests by adopting mixed strategies such as hedging and non-alignment. Fiji has opted to engage with China as a trading and investment partner to maximise its economic returns, despite claims of "China threat" made by the traditional Western players. However, in doing this, Fiji has maintained its relationship with its traditional partners and is making relations with new players in the region. The chapter demonstrates that Fiji's strategy is to not take sides with the competing countries. Instead, it is taking a middle position and seeking to leverage the regional dynamics for its own benefit, using its agency to shape great power engagement despite its small size.

This chapter also reveals how the imposition of sanctions on Fiji after the 2006 military coup from Australia, New Zealand and other Western countries contributed towards Fiji's foreign policies and opened the door to increasing aid flows from China.

1. Background

Fiji has always had a prominent presence in the region, but it was not since the last 15 years or so that Fiji's mark of true independence as a sovereign nation has intensified. In fact, it was Fiji's post-2006 diplomatic isolation by traditional "friends" that motivated it to explore and maximise new opportunities. Prior to a military coup in 2006, Fiji's foreign policy was closely aligned with Australia and New Zealand, and Fiji had benefited from an ongoing collaborative relationship (Higgs, 2021).

Fiji is an archipelago of 322 islands, with an Exclusive Economic Zone of 1.26 million square kilometres. According to the Fiji Bureau of Statistics (2021), Fiji's 2021 predicted population was 893,468. Fiji maintains diplomatic relations with over 170 countries and is a member of many regional and international groups including the Forum Fisheries Agency, the Commonwealth of Nations, World Health Organisation, Pacific Community, Rarotonga Treaty, South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone and the United Nations. Through these memberships, Fiji demonstrates "commitment to its own economic, political and cultural security, as well as security and peace in the Pacific region, and building enduring cooperation with its neighbours and the international community" (Higgs, 2021). In early 2021, Fiji's Permanent Representative to the United Nations in Geneva, Ambassador Nazhat Shameem Khan, was elected as President of the United Nations Human Rights Council.

Politics in Fiji has always been colourful. The Alliance Party governed Fiji since its independence in 1970 until the Fijian Labour Party defeated the Alliance Party in the 1987 elections. The new government was a coalition led by a party of majority Indo-Fijians. This resulted in Fiji's first coupe d'état (coup) in May 1987 which overthrew the Labour government followed by the second coup in September in the same year. Fiji had its third coup in 2000. In 2006, Fiji experienced another coup led by the then military leader and the current Prime Minister, Voreqe 'Frank' Bainimarama. Frank Bainimarama was appointed the interim Prime Minister in 2007 and his political party, Fiji First, won the general elections in

2014 and 2018. The 2006 coup was strongly condemned by Australia, New Zealand, members of the Pacific Island Forum, Commonwealth nations and the UN Security Council, which eventually led to Fiji's membership from the Commonwealth and Pacific PIF being revoked.

2. Diplomatic Strategy

For Fiji, it's not just the rise of China and growing strategic competition in the region that shaped its current policies and strategies, but also the international criticism and sanctions which followed the 2006 coup. Actually, it could be said that the rise of China and great power competition in the region was opportune for Fiji. The sanctions resulted in Fiji looking for alternative diplomatic partners, in particular China, and sparked a change in Fiji's foreign policy which has continues until today.

Furthermore, Fiji's approach to dealing with the strategic competition should also be assessed in conjunction with its internal development policy. In September 2007, Fiji's interim government launched a national initiative to build a better Fiji for all through the Peoples Charter for Change, Peace and Progress (Charter) to improve its image in the international community. The Charter, a legal document to complement Fiji's earlier 1997 Constitution, was designed to establish compulsory guidelines for any government policy in Fiji over the coming years. According to Komai (2015), the Charter requires Fiji to enlarge its foreign relations, extending beyond traditional allies to countries that respect Fiji's sovereignty and understand the needs and challenges the country was going through.

Fiji has largely adopted three approaches to advancing its domestic interest and dealing with the great power competition. It has developed the "Look North" policy, "friends to all and enemy to none" policy and is actively utilising the collective sovereignty and agency of Pacific Island countries via regionalism/sub-regionalism.

Look North

The heightened strategic competition in the region coupled with Fiji's' treatment as a pariah state after the 2006 coup led Fiji to develop a new strategy called the "Look North" policy. Fiji's "Look North" policy has guided its diplomacy since 2006. The "Look North" policy must be appropriately explored to fully understand Fiji's approach to the great power competition.

Fiji's position was spelt out clearly by its former Foreign Affairs Minister Ratu Inoke Kubuabola during the Australia Fiji Business Council meeting in 2013 where he said that "Fiji no longer looks to Australia and New Zealand but to the world" (Kubuabola, 2013). He said that, since 2009, Fiji had taken a "different path" and forged new relationships with countries that "understood and didn't judge the political reforms the country was going through". He said:

Jolted from our complacency by the doors that were slammed in our faces, we looked north — to the great powers of Asia, especially China, India and Indonesia and more recently to Russia. We looked south to the vast array of nations, big and small, that make up the developing world and we currently chair the G77, the biggest voting bloc at the United Nations. And we looked to our Melanesian neighbours, to forge closer ties with them and use our collective strength to make our voices heard in global forums and secure better trading deals for us all. (Kubuabola 2013)

Basically, 'Look North' policy is about finding better partners beyond the traditional Western players in the region. Esala Nayasi, Director of Fiji's Political and Treaties Division within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, elucidated that "these are partners who, despite the country's political situation, respected Fiji as equal and understood the policies put in place by the government to take the country back to democratic rule" (Nayasi, 2013). The former Minister for Foreign Affairs stated that "Fiji will not forget that when other countries were quick to condemn us following the events of 1987, 2000 and 2006, China and other friends in Asia demonstrated a more understanding and sensitive approach" (Tarte, 2014). In 2009, Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama, prior to Fiji's suspension from the PIF, said that the "Chinese authorities are very sympathetic and understand what's happening here — the fact that we need to do things in our own way."

China has been the key aspect of Fiji's "Look North" strategy. Fiji has enthusiastically engaged with China since its post military coup of 2006 sanctions, especially by its regional partners Australia and New Zealand. In addition, China's rise as a Pacific player and the ensuing geostrategic competition between it and the U.S. has meant Fiji has received more attention in recent years than in the past. Fiji's "Look North" policy and

China's mounting interest in the Pacific region have led these two countries to establish close links with each other.

Fiji became the first Pacific Island country to establish diplomatic relationship with the People's Republic of China (The Cove, 2021). Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama made an official visit to Beijing in 2013 becoming the first Pacific Island leader to meet with the new Chinese President Xi Jinping, two months after he assumed office (Cain, 2015). In November 2014, Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Fiji during his ongoing three-nation South Pacific tour.

Bilateral visa exemption arrangement between the two countries was implemented in 2014 which has boosted visitor arrivals from China (Tarte, 2012). In May 2021, Investment Fiji in partnership with the Pacific Trade Invest China and the Chinese Embassy launched the Fiji-China Virtual Trade Expo series to create opportunities for Fijian businesses.

A few examples of cultural diplomacy between Fiji and China include the launch of the Fiji-China Friendship Association in 2012 which aims to strengthen "bilateral exchanges in the area of poverty reduction, culture, sports and women's involvement in trade and investment" (PCFA n.d.). Further, in 2012, a Confucius Institute was opened in the Suva-based University of the South Pacific which offered Chinese studies (Chinese language and culture courses) to local and Asian students. In 2015, the China Culture Centre was opened in Fiji to expand interest in Chinese culture and history among people in Fiji and neighbouring South Pacific islands (Qi, 2015).

In August 2014, the then president of Fiji Ratu Epeli Nailatikau met President Xi in China during the Summer Youth Olympic Games and he also officiated the opening of the Fiji Consulate in Shanghai. Ratu Epeli Nailatikau, in response to Zhenjiang Province's donation of 500 sewing machines to Fiji as part of its empowerment programme, said "I am confident that there are more opportunities as such that we can undertake together and your assistance in this regard is fully acknowledged and appreciated" (The Fijian Government, 2014).

Fiji's "Look North" strategy has not been limited to only looking at China. The Sino-U.S. rivalry in the region has also sparked interest of other major players on the global stage. As such, Fiji has taken advantage of the attention and is effectively engaging with other player who have a great deal of interest in the great power competition. For instance, in 2014, the Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi visited Fiji where he announced India would provide a US\$70 million line of credit to build a co-generation power plant at the RARO sugar mill, US\$5 million to strengthen and modernise small and medium size businesses, and a parliamentary library (Hayward-Jones, 2014). According to Hayward-Jones (2014), Modi's speeches and remarks in Fiji suggest "India's relationship with the Pacific Islands region will remain largely focused on Fiji, either as the target of India's attentions or as a 'hub' through which India engages with other Pacific Island countries".

Fiji has and continues to leverage the great power competition. Via its "Look North" policy, Fiji has sought to recreate its image on the international stage by convening meetings for two important leaders, namely Chinese President Xi Jinping and India Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in one week in 2014. Further, through its "Look North" policy, Fiji also deepened ties with Indonesia and South Korea, "setting up diplomatic missions in these two countries in April 2011 and July 2012, respectively" (Cain, 2015).

Stepping-up in the Pacific

Fiji sustained its prominence in the region and globally by using the Pacific states' collective agency, especially when it was removed from the key regional institution – PIF after the 2006 coup. Fiji was aware of the collective perception and dissatisfaction of the Pacific leaders of an Australia-centric PIF. According to Penjueli (2015), Fiji seized the opportunity and "deliberately pursued an agenda of regional self-determination" and set about reshaping "regional diplomacy and architecture based on this principle."

Fiji has been incredibly successful at a subregional level and garnered the support of the powerful subregional group, the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG), by enticing the Melanesian leaders with the notion of working in the "Pacific Way" without the participation of New Zealand and Australia. Fiji chaired the MSG Leader's Summit in 2011 and acted as the spokesperson for MCG's agenda. Fiji's Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama

called the first “Engaging with the Pacific” (EWTP) meeting in 2011 where most of the MSG members plus several other Pacific leaders attended (Cain, 2015). Fiji recognised the importance of regional and subregional mechanisms in global geopolitics when it was cut out from various key institutions. An article in *The Guardian* in 2011 stated that “Bainimarama shows no signs of loosening his grip on Fiji and is portraying the MSG, with him at its helm, as the new leadership of the Pacific islands region”. The article further stated that Fiji is looking for new friends to help “shore up Fiji's tottering economy and Bainimarama has been busy strengthening ties with Asian powers” (*The Guardian*, 2011).

China was one of the countries that offered (and continues to offer) financial support to MSG. In 2012, during the China special envoy visit to the MSG Secretariat, MSG expressed appreciation for the continuous cooperation and growing relations between China, the MSG and its members through various programmes and activities of the Secretariat (MSG Secretariat). It was also expressed that the China-MSG relationship is symbolized by the MSG Headquarters built by the Chinese Government in 2008 which China continues to maintain and support to enable the Secretariat to carry out its work programmes (MSG Secretariat).

Similarly, Fiji used the notion of working in the “Pacific Way” (without the participation of New Zealand and Australia) and regional self-determination during the third EWTP meeting organised by Fiji where the Pacific leaders agreed to establish the Pacific Islands Development Forum (PIDF). The government of Fiji underwrote the PIDF’s establishment, providing it with seed funding, premises and staff for its secretariat (Aqorau and Batley, 2019). Fiji also hosted the first three PIDF summits in 2013, 2014 and 2015, and the inaugural meeting was attended by more than 20 Pacific Island countries and territories, as well as donors and development partners. This is evidence of “support for Fiji’s leadership of an alternative regional grouping to the Pacific Islands Forum” (Komai, 2015). The PIDF developed an international profile and in 2016, it achieved observer status at the UN General Assembly. Frank Bainimarama said that PIDF is being put forward by Fiji as an alternative to the PIF, which Bainimarama said no longer represents the interests and needs of the region (Pareti, 2013). In an interview with *Islands Business* magazine in 2015, a Fijian diplomat Kaliopate Tavola said the agenda of the PIDF was “refreshing” because it responded to the growing frustrations of Fiji and other Pacific Islands towards Australia and New Zealand. Fiji was also instrumental in boosting the role of the Pacific Small Islands Developing States (PSIDS) group as an “alternative caucus to

the PIF group and successfully lobbied for the renaming of the Asia group to Asia-Pacific Small Islands Developing States group” at the United Nations (Tarte, 2021).

Fiji’s regional and subregional step up has worked well for it. It not only improved Fiji’s image regionally, but also exhibited Fiji as a regional leader on the international platform. According to Nayasi:

Since we were out of the Pacific Islands Forum, our only opportunity was to revamp our participation at sub-regional and regional organisations like the Melanesian Spearhead Group, Secretariat of the Pacific Community, the Engaging With The Pacific, which is now known as the Pacific Islands Development Forum. (Nayasi, 2013)

Fiji emerged as chair of the powerful G77 plus China lobby group within the UN in 2013. According to Nayasi (2013), chairing the G77 plus China for 2013 was the pinnacle of Fiji’s achievements because it became the first Pacific Small Island Developing State. Fiji’s global standing received a major boost in 2012 when Brazil and India supported Frank Bainimarama to lead the International Sugar Council. The Council is the “peak body for the world’s largest sugar producers, representing 86 countries” (Cain, 2015). Bainimarama’s reaction to his election was as follows:

The election is yet another international vote of confidence in Fiji and the Government’s reform program. Our chairmanship of the ISC comes on top of the extraordinary honour of chairing the G77 and China, recently chairing the EU–ACP trade negotiations, and re-joining the Pacific ACP. Fiji’s standing in the world has never been higher. (Bainimarama; 2012)

Fiji, through its UN membership, has actively remained engaged in peacekeeping. In 2010, “Australia and New Zealand attempted to shut Fiji out of UN peacekeeping duties”, however, the resolution was withdrawn even before it was tabled to the Security Council (Komai, 2015). The success of Fiji’s regional step up as a leader and its ‘Look North’ policy was displayed when China refused to support the move by Australia and New Zealand and there was indication that the remaining four members of the Security Council would not support the resolution.

Friends to All and Enemies to None

Central to Fiji's foreign policy is its approach of being "friends to all and enemies to none". This approach is unsurprising, especially given Fiji's post military coup sanctions, as it offers Fiji the flexibility to engage with other countries to ensure it is able to fulfill its domestic needs. The increase in activities in the region offered Fiji the opportunity to engage with other countries which was embraced by Fiji. By formulating the "friends to all and enemies to none" approach, Fiji ensured it was in the position to maximise gains from the strategic competition. Fiji has long standing relationship with its traditional partners, especially Australia, New Zealand and U.S. However, China's rise in the region provided Fiji with an opportunity to gain another powerful partner.

Referring to its "friends to all and enemies to none" policy, Fiji shared its perception in relation to its increased engagement with China. At a speech during the China-Fiji 40th Anniversary Diplomatic Relations Symposium in 2015, Frank Bainimarama said:

Fiji especially values China's respect for the central tenet of our foreign policy, which is to be enemies to none and friends to all. We have no desire as a Pacific Small Island Developing State to be drawn into the conflicts of others. We seek good relations with every nation and people of goodwill throughout the world. And we know that China understands that desire and supports our right to pursue a foreign policy that is staunchly independent.

Expanding relations also meant that Fiji had to look at establishing diplomatic ties with as many countries as possible, which according to Nayasi (2013) were countries that understood Fiji's political situation and did not interfere with its domestic affairs. Nayasi stated that:

We looked at our own database and realised that we have signed diplomatic relations with only 70 countries. We saw this was something that we needed to change — first of all that we must be friends with everyone. We had to look at our comparative advantage — what we can offer rather than just depending on two countries (Australia and New Zealand). (Nayasi, 2013)

As a result of this approach, between 2009–2013, Fiji added 63 more nations to its list of countries with diplomatic relations (Cain, 2015). According to Nayasi (2013), “Cabinet has now given the Ministry of Foreign Affairs the go-ahead to sign diplomatic relations with the rest of the member countries of the United Nations”. Fiji set up diplomatic missions in all key regions of the United Nations and even courted controversial friends such as Iran, North Korea, and Egypt. Nayasi’s (2013) response to this was that, “As far as we are concerned, it is about respect and treating each other equally”. Under this new policy of not choosing any side, Fiji has certainly succeeded in making new friends globally while upholding its sovereignty.

The sanctions against Fiji were lifted in 2014 after Fiji held general elections and returned to political diplomacy. Australia and New Zealand realised that the sanctions did not impact Fiji in the manner they had hoped it would. Australia and New Zealand were fully aware of the gap it had left which gave other players, especially China, the opportunity to strengthen its relationship with Fiji. Fiji desperately needed other partners after the sanctions were imposed and the great power competition in the region proved timely. Fiji recognised and exploited the great power competition to advance its own internal and developmental needs. During a 60 Minute interview, Fiji’s Attorney General, Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum, said:

Australia probably needs to relook at the way they look at the Pacific. They played it wrong. They left an opportunity for anybody to come in. China did.... And of course, one cannot complain about that now. We are a country. We need to develop. We need to continue with living. We need to continue to grow. (60 Minutes 2018)

Not only Australia, but New Zealand and the U.S. also relooked at their Pacific policies amid China’s rise in the region and China’s strong relations with Fiji. Australia, New Zealand and U.S. revamped their engagement with the now more open-minded Fiji by adjusting their foreign policies. Despite Sayed-Khaiyum’s comments above and Fiji’s “Look North” policy, Fiji has stayed true to its “friends to all and enemies to none” policy and welcomed its traditional partners back after the sanctions were lifted.

Australia and Fiji have resumed their high-level political, diplomatic and military engagement. For instance, a new consulate general and trade commission was assigned by the Fijian

Government in Sydney in 2018 (Tarte, 2021). In 2019, Australia and Fiji signed the “Fiji-Australia Vuvale Partnership” which builds on the already strong foundations in the Fiji-Australia relationship and paves the way for deeper security, economic and people-to-people links between both countries. According to the Australian Government DFAT website, under the new PacificAus Sports program, Australia supported Fiji's national netball team, the Fiji Pearls, to compete at the 2019 Netball World Cup. The website states that Australia also sponsored the Fiji Rugby League team, the Kaiviti Silktails, to play in the Ron Massey Cup again in 2021.

New Zealand too resumed full bilateral engagement with Fiji in 2014. Since then, the two countries have had various high-level visits, including in February 2019 where eight Fijian female MPs visited the New Zealand Parliament on a parliamentary strengthening tour (New Zealand Foreign Affairs and Trade). According to New Zealand Foreign Affairs and Trade, some of the key areas of New Zealand's involvement with Fiji has been enabling the delivery of affordable, resilient housing solutions and community development programmes in vulnerable communities; supporting Fiji's electoral system in 2018; partnering with the United Nations in its Parliamentary Support Programme; boosting the quality of higher education and skills training; and supporting Fiji's ongoing work and leadership on climate change issues, including by supporting Fiji to facilitate key international dialogues and meetings. On 29 March 2022, Fiji and New Zealand jointly signed the “Duavata Partnership: Aotearoa Whenua Manapori o Whiti Tauaki Mahitahi” agreement during the New Zealand Foreign Affairs Minister's visit to Suva. The agreement states that it "affirms our joint ambition to elevate the relationship to a new level of expanded strategic cooperation in the years to come based on a foundation of shared values and equal partnership and achieved through trust and consultation" (Radio New Zealand, 2022).

The U.S. government has similarly, after Fiji's 2014 elections, reinitiated security assistance and lifted restrictions on U.S. financing assistance to the Government of Fiji that were put in place. According to Zhang (2021), U.S. is investing in Fiji's development goals such as funding humanitarian aid groups (for example, Field Ready), availing necessary hygiene material after Tropical Cyclone Harold and transitioning aid towards environmental resilience projects. U.S. provides Foreign Military Financing to equip Fiji's military and participation in the International Military Education and Training program, which provides

professional military education and leadership development courses to Fijian officials in the United States (U.S. Department of State, 2020). In 2019, Fiji and the U.S signed a shiprider agreement under which U.S. has hosted Fijian shipriders on patrol on U.S. Navy and Coast Guard vessels and Fiji is also a regular participant in U.S. Indo-Pacific Command sponsored workshops on topics including “humanitarian assistance/disaster relief, maritime security, peacekeeping, and international humanitarian law” (U.S. Department of State, 2020). In February 2022, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken paid a rare visit to Fiji, the first by a U.S. secretary of state in 37 years. At the joint press availability, the Acting Fijian Prime Minister Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum said:

When the USA signaled its intent to leave the Paris Agreement, we felt forgotten by a superpower. So of course, we welcome President Biden’s promise to the world that America was back. Mr. Secretary, your being here shows that promise was more than word. (U.S. Department of State, 2022)

Fiji’s approach demonstrates that even though it has increased its engagement with China, it has not allied with China to the extent of breaking ties with its Metropolitan partners. Fiji, by pursuing a policy of non-alignment, continues to expand its diplomatic ties across the globe (Xinhua, 2014). Fiji has stayed consistent in its foreign affairs policy of non-alignment even in dealing with its new close friend China. Fiji government did not shy away from clarifying a statement released by Beijing that claimed that “Fiji supported China’s proposition on the issue of the South China Sea” (Tarte, 2021). The Fijian Government swiftly clarified that the statement “incorrectly depicts Fijian policy towards China’s territorial claims in the South China Sea” (Delaibatiki, 2016). The Fijian Government made it clear that it does not support anyone’s position on the controversy in the South China Sea. According to the former Foreign Minister of Fiji, this sent a clear message to the international community that “we will not be forced into a foreign policy position by anyone” (Delaibatiki, 2016).

3. Development Aid and Economic Impact

According to the Lowy Institute, aid from China to Fiji amounted to AU\$485 million between 2006 and 2016, compared to AU\$408 million from Australia for the same period (Chang, 2018). Direct foreign and local investments generated FJ\$613 million for Fiji's economy from August 2018 to May 2019 (Xinhua, 2021).

A total of 277 Chinese investment projects worth about FJ\$2.36 billion has been successfully implemented in Fiji over the last five years (Fiji Sun, 2021). In 2016, China opened a China Chamber of Commerce in Fiji. By 2019 it had 40 member companies (Tarte, 2021). According to the Chamber's Secretary General Zhou Yan CCCF, member companies had invested US\$100 million in Fiji in the two years since its inception (Chambers, 2019). In 2011, a memorandum of understanding was signed between Fiji and China to enhance bilateral law enforcement cooperation under which the Fiji Police Force and China's Ministry of Public Security developed as 'a close working relationship', with Fijian police officers undertaking training in China on tackling transnational crime such as cybercrime, drugs and corruption, as well as receiving equipment (Tarte, 2021).

In 2010, the All China Women's Federation donated over 750 sewing machines valued to the Fiji Women's Federation, which added to 200 sewing machines distributed in 2009 (BBC Asia Pacific, 2010). In 2014, the Chinese government provided approximately FJD25 million to Fiji as a token of goodwill from the People's Republic of China and her people (MENA Report, 2014). In 2011, China, through its Ambassador in Fiji, donated a batch of media equipment which included 10 portable computers, 20 digital cameras, 10 flat-panel TVs and 10 desktop computers to the Fiji government (Xinhua News Agency, 2011). In 2008, China loaned approximately US\$230 million in soft loan to Fiji, which included eight projects mainly in the housing, agriculture and commercial areas (BBC Asia Pacific, 2008). In 2021, the Chinese Government donated approximately FJ\$1million in humanitarian aid to Fiji in "support of the Fijian Government's rebuilding and recovery works in the aftermath of Severe Tropical Cyclones Yasa and TC Ana" (The Fiji Government, 2021). China has committed around US\$31 million on its E- Government Project since 2006 (Lowy Institute, 2020). China further committed to donating US\$4.3 million in cash and medical Supplies to Fiji and other Pacific Island Countries to Fight COVID-19 (Embassy of The People's Republic of China, 2020).

The U.S., in a move to increase its trade engagement with Fiji and the Pacific, signed the Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA) with Fiji in 2020 to further expand and deepen bilateral trade and investment ties between the two countries (U.S. Department of State, 2022). The U.S. ambassador Joseph Celler said the TIFA will help build already the already expanding trade relationship between the U.S and Fiji, "which hit a record high in 2019". The two-way goods trade between Fiji and U.S. totalled nearly \$350 million in 2019 (U.S.

Department of State, 2022). The U.S. has also partnered with a variety of Fijian organizations to promote prosperity and shared values. For instance, it is providing funding of \$200,000 through the Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation to the Fiji Museum to digitize their entire collection to preserve an important record of Fiji's history and culture (U.S. Department of State, 2022). The U.S. Embassy in Fiji has awarded more than \$300,000 in small grants to boost economic resilience and women's economic empowerment and in 2020, the Embassy launched the Academy for Women Entrepreneurs to increase women entrepreneurs' core business and networking skills (U.S. Department of State, 2022).

In respect of Australia-Fiji relations, according to the DFAT website, the two-way goods and services trade have steadily increased year-on-year totalling AU\$2.47 billion in 2019. Australia's foreign investment in Fiji valued at approximately AU\$1.34 billion in 2018 primarily focusing on tourism, the financial sector and manufacturing. As for military aid, the Australian Government refitted a Fijian naval vessel which was coincidentally returned just before the arrival of a new hydrographic vessel from China (Tarte, 2021). Australia has started work on building a wharf in Suva under the joint Australian-Fiji wharf redevelopment project. The new wharf will provide "berthing for two new Australian-gifted Guardian-class patrol boats, one of which has already been delivered and is in service with the Fijian Navy, with the other due in 2023" (Australian Department of Defence, 2021).

New Zealand Defence Force, on the hand, deployed one of its inshore patrol vessels to Fiji to assist with surveillance of Fiji's exclusive economic zone in 2017 and 2018. During 2016/2017, New Zealand provided a total of \$NZ21.6million, with \$NZ15.1million as part of bilateral programme funding for key sectors such as agriculture, education and overall human development (Shen, 2018). According to MFAT website, New Zealand contributed to Fiji's post-Tropical Cyclone Winston recovery through a \$15 million support package used to help repair and rebuild schools, hospitals and other buildings. In 2018, the two-way trade between these two countries amounted to \$1.17 billion (New Zealand Foreign Affairs and Trade).

In 2018, a US guided missile destroyer visited Fiji as part of its Oceania Maritime Security Initiative deployment. In 2018 Fiji settled a "Shiprider agreement" with the US Government to allow Fijian law enforcement officers to be deployed on US coast guard and naval vessels (Tarte, 2021).

Fiji also derives considerable foreign revenue through remittances from its soldiers on peacekeeping duties. Peacekeeping is a key pillar in Fiji's foreign policies and have provided employment to thousands of Fijian men and women. According to Tarte (2021), UN peacekeeping has contributed over FJ\$200 million in revenue per annum to date, earning more than traditional sectors such as sugar and garment manufacturing.

4. Analysis

Contrary to concerns about China's increasing influence in Fiji, it is evident that Fiji has proactively exploited the great power competition and the rise of China to benefit diplomatically and economically. Fiji has done this "while maintaining and exercising its autonomy and agency" (Tarte, 2021). A key contributor towards Fiji's approach and foreign policies such as "Look North" and "friends to all and enemies to none" was the imposition of sanctions on Fiji after the 2006 military coup by its traditional partners, in particular Australia, New Zealand and the U.S. This opened the door to increasing aid flows from China and Fiji's engagement with new players. According to Tarte (2021), on the "political and diplomatic front, China has proven to be a close and valued supporter and partner, especially as Fiji sought to define a more independent foreign policy after 2009" where on the "economic front, Fiji and China have explored new opportunities, especially in trade and investment". As such, Fiji has sought to engage with China to pursue its own political and economic needs.

The U.S.-China competition was especially timely for Fiji as it was looking for new friends following the imposition of sanctions. Fiji forged strong ties with China both economically and diplomatically to further its own needs. Fiji is often seen as publicly displays its appreciation for China's assistance at a time when its old partners ousted Fiji from key institutions. Fiji continues to engage with China as a trading, investment and diplomatic partner in order to address its diplomatic concerns and fulfill its domestic development and economic needs. Unsurprisingly, Fiji has rebuffed claims of "China threat" and is countering this narrative with its domestic development needs and preference for maintaining autonomous foreign policies.

Having said that, Fiji welcomed the return of its traditional Western partners (Australia, New Zealand, the U.S.) after its 2014 elections. Despite the heavy sanctions imposed by these

countries and Fiji's new and strong relations with China and other new partners, Fiji continues to engage with its traditional Western partners. In fact, Fiji recognized that the return of its traditional partners presented Fiji with further opportunities and offers it the standing to negotiate with old and new players in the region. Fiji is not taking sides with any competing country. Instead, it has taken a middle position seeking to leverage the regional dynamics for its own benefit, using its agency to shape great power engagement despite its small size.

Visibly, Fiji is exhibiting hedging and non-alignment behaviour by using the growing strategic competition and rise of China in the region as an opportunity to further its own internal development and political needs, and to maximise its economic returns. Using the mixed strategies such as hedging and non-alignment, Fiji is seeking to benefit - economically, politically and strategically.

CHAPTER 5

Case Studies – Samoa and Kiribati

The presiding chapter discussed that while the Pacific Island interests are best pursued through a combination of regional and sub-regional channels, some interests are unique to particular countries and are more specific. Thus, the presiding chapter investigated the strategies and foreign policies of Fiji.

This chapter presents case studies on two Island states, namely Samoa and Kiribati. Samoa, which falls in the subregion of Polynesia, has been chosen as a case study because it is arguably China's oldest and most faithful ally in the region (Edgar and Wesley-Smith, 2010) and one of the most heavily indebted countries in the world to China, owing the equivalent of 19.9 per cent of its gross domestic product to the country (Lowy Institute, 2019). The reason for choosing Kiribati as a case study is its strategic location. Kiribati is strategically located midway between Asia and the Americas and has hosted military aircraft during World War Two and controls one of the biggest exclusive economic zones in the world. Basically, by the end of this chapter, this thesis would conduct and complete three case studies from each subregional grouping in the South Pacific.

This chapter investigates the strategies and foreign policies of Samoa and Kiribati. It highlights the approaches adopted by Samoa and Kiribati to address and manage the great power competition in the region. This chapter is divided into two main sections. Each section will present a case study, on Samoa and Kiribati, respectively. Both these sections will be subdivided into four sections. The first subsection in each case study will explore the background of each country. The second subsection will examine the respective country's diplomatic strategies in relation to the great power competition in the region. The third subsection in each case study will focus on economic impacts and development aid. The final subsection in each case study will analyse the findings for that case study, with an additional section that will discuss the overall findings.

This chapter demonstrates that Samoa and Kiribati's approach to the great power competition is primarily shaped by their internal development policies and interests. It reveals that these countries have identified their vital national needs and are engaging with the competing countries to maximise their gains and fulfill their national needs. The chapter discusses how Samoa and Kiribati perceive China's rise in the region and their views on their traditional partners, in particular Australia, New Zealand and the U.S. It demonstrates that both Samoa and Kiribati have

welcomed China's heightened engagement in the Pacific region and are effectively engaging with China to assist and progress with what is in their countries' best interest without breaking ties with their traditional Western partners. Essentially, this chapter reveals that both Samoa and Kiribati, while denying the "China threat", have chosen not to take sides and are engaging with all competing countries, using the strategic competition to leverage their bargaining power over key issues concerning each country and maximize national interests.

CASE STUDY – SAMOA

1. Background

Samoa was created in 1900 when the archipelago was divided between Germany and the United States of America (DFAT, 2012). Samoa became a mandate of New Zealand following the defeat of Germany in World War II. In 1962, Samoa gained independence and became the first Pacific Island nation. Until 1997, it was known as Western Samoa. Samoa has been relatively peaceful and stable since independence, compared to a few other Island countries.

Samoa had a very cautious approach to international relations since it gained independence in 1962 until 1976. The government's overall approach was described as "to make haste slowly" which in "international affairs is translated as a watered-down form of isolationism" (Iati, 2010). According to Iati (2010), this approach was reflected in Samoa's behaviour in that it waited fourteen years after independence before seeking to join the United Nations. The change in Samoa's foreign policy came about in 1976 when the new government elected took the necessary steps to admit Samoa to the United Nations and "hosted a group of officials from the Soviet Union at the independence celebrations" in the first year it was elected (Iati, 2010).

2. Diplomatic Strategy

It was Samoa's approach to international relations in 1976 that led to the Samoa-China Relationship. Samoa formed diplomatic relations with China in 1976, at a time when many Pacific Island states still recognised Taiwan. In 1978, China established an embassy in Apia. According to Iati (2010), China's motive may have been to limit Soviet influence in the Pacific and a part of China's larger Pacific policy, since it had established diplomatic ties with Fiji two days before Samoa. The end of cold war diminished the strategic value of the Pacific for the U.S. and other Western powers. For instance, U.S. closed its embassy in Samoa in 2001. This left a power vacuum in the region and created further opportunity for China.

Samoa's approach to dealing with the great power competition should be evaluated in conjunction with its internal development policy. The Strategy for the Development of Samoa (SDS) 2016/17-2019/20 is Samoa's short-to-medium term planning document that articulates its national priorities and strategies. It principally aims to promote sustainable development and to be inclusive of all Samoan nationals through taking measures in economic, social, infrastructural and environmental areas (Embassy of Japan in the Independent State of Samoa, 2020). Samoa's long-term strategy is documented in the *Samoa 2040: Transforming Samoa to a Higher Growth Path* (Samoa 2040). Samoa 2040 sets out a roadmap for development opportunities such as tourism, agriculture and fishing, digital economy, and labour mobility. The aim of Samoa 2040 is to boost Samoa's economic growth, create employment, generate government revenues and raise standards of living (Government of Samoa, 2021). The SDS and Samoa 2040 act as propellers on how Samoa is managing the rise of China and great power competition in the region.

Samoa has a long-standing relationship with China. Samoa is one of China's most reliable allies in the region to the point of almost complete absence of ties with Taiwan (Edgar and Wesley-Smith, 2010). What's interesting to note is that Iati (2010) argues that China's rise in Samoa was also prompted by the Samoan government and its decision to enter into the relationship with China to attract the attention of other influential regional powers. For instance, Meleisea and Schoeffel (1979) argues that the hosting of the Russian delegation and the establishment of diplomatic ties with China can be interpreted as "a nudge in the ribs of the two leading metropolitan powers in the South Pacific, Australia and New Zealand". This approach by Samoa demonstrated to its traditional partners, especially the two most influential players in the region, namely, Australia and New Zealand, that despite its small size, it is capable of engaging and dealing with superpowers. This strategy was successful and was met with swift success as China opened an embassy in Apia, being the only diplomatic mission in Samoa besides that of New Zealand, and shortly after Australia and the US also established direct representation in Samoa (Meleisea and Schoeffel, 1979). Since then, China and Samoa have had many diplomatic exchanges. Samoa seems to adopt a similar approach to dealing with the current strategic competition in the region, which other than luring the regional powers back in the region, is also providing Samoa the opportunity to explore new prospects and act more independently in the international arena.

In 2009, Samoa established an embassy in Beijing. In 1996, the two countries entered into a mutual exemption of visa agreement allowing Samoans who travel to Hong Kong to stay for thirty

days without having to obtain a visa and vice versa (Ilati, 2010). China offers more than twenty scholarships to Samoan students to study at tertiary institutions in China every year. This has led to an increased number of Samoan students learning Mandarin while abroad and recently in Samoa, the Mandarin language is also being taught in schools and the National University of Samoa (Sanerivi, 2016). China also offers a variety of short-term trainings and seminars for Samoan officials from both private and the public sectors mainly for capacity building in areas such as Human Resource Development, Hospitality, Environment, Agriculture, Innovation and IT, Finance, etc.

Samoa's former Prime Minister, Tofilau Eti was one of the first foreign leaders to visit China after the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989. This visit cemented the relationship and China quickly rewarded Samoa with a US\$12 million grant (Ilati, 2010). There were suggestions that Tofilau Eti had expected the grant would materialize with the visit (New Internationalist, 1991).

Samoa became the first country in the South Pacific region to sign a memorandum of understanding on cooperation with China under the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Yi, 2021). China has generally been pleased with Samoa's approach towards it. In September 2018, Chinese President Xi Jinping met with the then Samoan Prime Minister Tuilaepa Sailele Malielegaoi where he expressed his gratitude for Tuilaepa's contribution to the development of China-Samoa ties and said that China appreciates Samoa's firm and long-lasting adherence to the one-China principle. Meanwhile, Tuilaepa Malielegaoi said the Samoan side values the ties with China and is willing to boost people-to-people exchanges as well as trade, investment and tourism cooperation with the Chinese side within the Belt and Road framework (China Plus, 2018). Tuilaepa Malielegaoi said that China is not only a heavyweight partner in economic and trade cooperation, but also an important ally in environmental protection (Xinhua, 2020). Unlike most other Pacific Island countries, the China-Taiwan rivalry is not a significant factor in Samoa. According to Ilati (2010), Samoa "seems to have responded to the China-Taiwan rivalry by putting all its eggs into the China basket" and has never wavered in its support of China.

However, Samoa's relationship with China does have implications on its relationship with its traditional partners. How Samoa perceives its traditional partners, especially the U.S., was expressed in an interview in 2012 where the then Prime Minister Tuilaepa Malielegaoi stated that he considered China a better friend to Pacific countries than the U.S. He accused the U.S. of showing a lack of interest in the South Pacific and said China filled a gap that Australia and New

Zealand could not by being flexible about aid delivery (ABC Radio Australia News, 2012). In another interview in the same year, when Tuilaepa Malielegaoi was asked about the American role in the Pacific he replied that “the U.S. president can say whatever he wants but the reality is that the U.S. cannot match what China is doing to help the Pacific” (Radio New Zealand, 2012). Further, in an interview with Xinhua in the same year, Tuilaepa Malielegaoi told the reporter that:

[t]he uniqueness of the Chinese assistance is its flexibility and very quick response by the authorities in China... The other thing which I’m always impressed by is that when we come to China there’s always that readiness among the leaders to meet with us and to listen. You have to find that in many, many, many big countries – they’re always busy and the leaders are not able to meet with us. (Xinhua, 2012)

Tuilaepa Malielegaoi’s comments above reveals that Samoa’s approach to the great power competition is based on what best meets its internal needs and is favourable to its development policies. Clearly, Samoa considers China to be more flexible with its assistance and quick to respond to Samoa’s needs compared to its other traditional partners and as such has welcomed China’s assistance.

Nonetheless, Samoa has not abandoned its ties with its traditional partners. Samoa, by actively engaging with China, has displayed to its traditional partners that it can make its own decisions and successfully deal with a superpower. This strategy has benefited Samoa as the traditional Metropolitan players have since strategised to recommit themselves to Samoa, and the South Pacific generally. For example, in 2012, Samoa and the U.S. signed a Mutual Law Enforcement Agreement which allows Samoan maritime officials to utilize U.S. Coast Guard and Navy vessels to provide maritime policing in Samoan waters. Further, in 2019, the U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) conducted Operation Aiga in Samoa and American Samoa, during which Samoan law enforcement personnel embarked on a USCG cutter to patrol Samoa’s exclusive economic zone and enforce Samoan sovereignty (Waidelich & DeThomas, 2021). Both Australia and New Zealand participated in Operation Aiga alongside the U.S. in 2019 and this operation was one of several similar activities that these countries, along with France, conducted under the Pacific Quadrilateral Defense Coordination Group in support of Pacific Island countries (Waidelich & DeThomas, 2021).

Samoa has established a strong security partnership with Australia. For instance, in 2009, the Samoa-Australia Policing Partnership (SAPP) was signed by the Australian Federal Police and the

Samoa Police Service (SPS), to enhance the performance and responsiveness of the SPS (DFAT, 2022). According to DFAT, the Australian Defence Force also supports Samoa's maritime security through the "Pacific Maritime Security Program under which Samoa received a new Guardian-class Patrol Boat, the *Nafanua II*, on 16 August 2019".

According to the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, under Australia's Seasonal Worker Programme and the Pacific Labour Scheme:

As at 31 August 2021, 1,579 Samoan workers have arrived in Australia since the restart of Pacific labour mobility: 1,269 in the Seasonal Worker Programme and 310 in the Pacific Labour Scheme. Currently there are 322 Samoan workers in Australia under the Pacific Labour Scheme.

Recent high-level visits between Australia and Samoa involved:- the 2017 visit to Samoa by the then Australian Prime Minister, and the Minister for International Development and the Pacific, to attend the PIF Leaders' Meeting in Apia, Samoa; the 2017 visit to Samoa by the then Australian Governor-General, on a bilateral visit; the 2018 visit to Samoa by the then Australia's Minister for Foreign Affairs and the Minister for International Development and the Pacific; the 2019 visit to Sydney by the then Samoan Prime Minister as a Guest of Government, including to watch a rugby match between Manu Samoa and the Wallabies; and the 2019 visit to Perth by the then Samoan Prime Minister to officially receive Samoa's new Guardian-class Patrol Boat under the Pacific Maritime Security Program (Australian Department of Foreign Affairs).

As for New Zealand, the Treaty of Friendship, which was signed by both countries when Samoa gained full independence, had been the foundation for relations between these two countries. Moreover, in 2019, New Zealand and Samoa reaffirmed their commitment grounded in the Treaty of Friendship by signing a Statement of Partnership which sets out their vision, priorities and principles for cooperation (MFAT). In recent years, there have been a number of official visits from both sides such as the 2018 visit to Samoa by New Zealand's Foreign Minister to attend the PIF Foreign Ministers Meeting; the 2018 visit to Samoa by New Zealand's Prime and Winston Peters led a Pacific Mission to Samoa, amongst other countries. In 2019, Samoa's then Commerce Minister visited New Zealand to discuss labour mobility and Recognised Seasonal Employment Scheme with New Zealand government agencies and industry. The same year, Samoa's then Deputy Prime Minister Fiame Naomi Mata'afa visited New Zealand to attend and speak at the Just Transition Summit in New Plymouth.

Samoa has also used Pacific regionalism to gain from the collective agency of the Pacific Island countries. For instance, Samoa is a member of the PIF and by virtue of this membership, it is a signatory of PACER Plus (by virtue of its membership with the PIF). Samoa became the first country to receive technical assistance under the PACER Plus Readiness Package to assist its legislative review and drafting process to ratify PACER Plus (MFAT; 2019). Samoa also participated in New Zealand's Canterbury Reconstruction labour mobility pilot where at least ten Samoan carpenters were recruited to work in Christchurch, New Zealand (MFAT, 2019).

3. Economic Impact and Development Aid

Samoa has welcomed China's rising number of infrastructure projects to progress with its internal development policies. By adopting this approach, Samoa has leveraged the great power competition in the region and profited greatly from its relationship with China. China offers significant aid to Samoa predominantly in the form of concessional loans and is mostly used for projects in education, government, civil society, and other social infrastructure sectors. Lowy Institute data reveals that China has advanced \$285 million in loans to Samoa and a further \$152 million in grants in the period between 2010 and 2018 (Stuff, 2021). According to Dornan and Brant:

Grant-based assistance has been directed towards post-tsunami reconstruction (US\$5.8 million, 2011–12—2013–14), refurbishment of facilities for the Pacific Games (US\$19 million, 2007) and Women and Youth Hall (\$US1.6 million, 2009), agricultural assistance (US\$0.8 million, 2009), and construction of eight school buildings. (Dornan and Brant, 2014)

By engaging with China, Samoa has also benefited from small interest-free loans, some of which have been converted into grants by the Chinese government. However, it is the China Eximbank loans that are considerably greater in value than other forms of assistance in Samoa. Dornan and Brant findings state:

Eximbank loans have been provided in recent years for construction of a number of prominent public buildings, including the National Convention Centre (US\$52 million, 2008–09—2012–13), the parliamentary complex and adjacent Ministry of Justice and Courts Administration buildings (US\$41 million, 2008–09—2010–11), a National Medical Centre and Ministry of Health Headquarters (US\$41 million, 2010– 11—

*ongoing), and a national broadband network (US\$15 million, 2011–12—ongoing).
(Dornan and Brant, 2014)*

Despite China's significant aid and economic investment in Samoa, Samoa continues to engage with its traditional partners, in particular, the U.S., Australia, New Zealand, and Japan. Samoa is aware that China's rise is causing its metropolitan partners a great deal of nervousness and panic over potentially losing its influence in the region. Samoa is using the rise of China and the nervousness of the traditional partners for its own national interest and development plans. Samoa has not broken its ties with its old partners but is also actively dealing with China by denying the "China threat" narrative of its Western partners. This approach has resulted in Samoa receiving considerable aid and trade from both sides.

For instance, in 2018, Samoa's total trade with US in goods was \$46 million and since 2013, US has constructed a hospital opposite the international airport, as well as renovated/rebuilt several schools around the country (U.S. Department of State, 2020). "According to UN Comtrade data, the United States is one of Samoa's largest export markets, accounting for more than 10 percent of Samoan exports in 2018" (U.S. Department of State, 2020). Samoa receives trade preferences under the US Generalized System of Preferences program and in "2018, approximately 32 percent of Samoa's exports to the US received preferential treatment under the said program" (U.S. Department of State, 2020).

Australia is Samoa's fourth largest merchandise export destination and fifth largest source of merchandise imports. In 2019-20, Australia imported goods from Samoa worth around \$5.2 million while its merchandise exports totalled \$51.4 million for the same period (Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade).

Japan, on the other hand, has provided aid for various projects in Samoa, including the recently completed expansion at the Port of Apia. "The resident advisor of the Japan International Cooperation Agency called the Japanese government's contributions to Samoa 'immense', citing other assistance, such as the construction of a university and the provision of experts for human resources development" (Waidelich & DeThomas, 2021).

According to New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs website, under the 2018-2021 development funding, New Zealand has rejuvenated the Apia waterfront to connect it to downtown Apia and provide a better tourism experience for visitors; installed three hydro-electric power plants to

enhance Samoa's commitment to renewable energy production; invested in the Small Business Enterprise Centre (SBEC) to provide business planning and growth support to small businesses; and contributed significantly to Samoa's response to the measles epidemic, including through specialist medical staff and vaccinations (MFAT, 2022).

In addition, Samoa has also received significant financial assistance from multilateral development organizations such as the Asian Development Bank, United Nations Development Program, and the World Bank. All these donors are part of or associated with the Western partners of Samoa that have been traditionally dominant in the Pacific region.

4. Analysis - Samoa

Samoa's strategy to dealing with the strategic competition in the region is shaped by its internal development policies and national needs. Thus, Samoa has welcomed China's rise in the region and is dealing with it to maximise its gains and fulfill its national needs. However, in doing this, Samoa has been vigilant in dealing with the great power competition in the region. It has neither allied with China nor has it accepted the "China threat" narrative pushed by the alarmed US, and its allies and friends. Samoa has, instead, pursued a dual-track whereby it has relatively engaged with both China and its traditional partners without taking sides.

However, Samoa's long relationship with China may be redefined as the Chinese influence has been a hotly debated topic during Samoa's last election campaign and since the governing party in Samoa has changed in July 2021 after nearly 40 years. For instance, the new Prime Minister of Samoa, Fiame Naomi Mataafa, has confirmed she will cancel a China-backed port project (Barrett, 2021). In an interview to Reuters over Zoom, Mataafa stated that China's interest in the Pacific had grown as U.S. had essentially "moved out" of the region and that "there seems to be a renewed interest in the Pacific, which may be a good thing, but not necessarily," (Barrett, 2021).

Nevertheless, according to Barrett (2021), Mataafa "hasn't closed the door to China as she navigates a path for the Pacific nation against a backdrop of intensifying regional competition between Beijing and Washington" (Barrett, 2021). In fact, Mataafa has indicated she would only approve investments that had clear benefits for Samoa. In terms of her approach to dealing with China, Mataafa said that "China had been a long-term partner and her government would assess the relationship in the same way it evaluates all of its bilateral relations" (Barrett, 2021). She has made it clear that her administration will treat China like any other partner. Although her party

has been critical of Samoa's past dealings with China during the election campaign, Mataafa's stance has changed somewhat after the recent general election. She has now indicated that she would seek to maintain good relations with both China and the U.S (Waidelich and DeThomas, 2021).

As such, it seems that Samoa's approach towards dealing with the strategic competition may not necessarily change and it would continue to engage with both China and its traditional partners to maximise gains. As Waidelich and DeThomas put it:

As Regardless of which Samoan party's leader establishes undisputed control over the island nation, neither FAST nor HRRP is likely to go "all in" with the U.S., China, or any other country. Both parties' leaders will probably continue to maximize benefits to Samoa through pragmatic balancing among foreign powers. (Waidelich and DeThomas, 2021)

CASE STUDY – KIRIBATI

5. Background

Kiribati, previously known as the Gilbert Islands, was pooled together with Tuvalu, previously known as Ellice Islands. Kiribati became a British protectorate in 1892 and the entire island group was made a British colony in 1916. During World War II, Japan occupied several of Kiribati's Islands but eventually Kiribati reverted to its former colonial status. Kiribati and Tuvalu split in 1975 and Kiribati eventually became independent on 12 July 1979.

Kiribati has a land area of approximately 811km² with sea area of approximately 3,550,000 km² and is made up of 33 coral atolls (Barclay and Cartright, 2007). The ratio of land to water surface area in Kiribati is 1:4,377 and most of the islands are low lying which means geographically Kiribati has limited ability for land-based economic activity, consequently overseas aid and distant fisheries make up the bulk of government revenue (Barclay and Cartright, 2007). Notwithstanding, Kiribati is the site of growing geopolitical competition. This is largely due to its strategic location and since it controls a vast expanse of ocean. Strategically, Kiribati's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) is the 12th largest in the world, "stretching from Hawaii to Guam and uniquely bridges most of the distance between Hawaii and Australia" (McGann, 2020). Kiribati EEZ also shares the world's largest Marine Protective Zone joined with the U.S. (McGann, 2020).

6. Diplomatic Strategy

There is newfound interest in the region by Western powers as a result of China's rise. This presents significant opportunities for the small island states, including Kiribati, which faces many economical and geological challenges. In order to fully understand Kiribati's approach to dealing with the great power competition, it is important to consider what Kiribati considers important for its own prosperity.

Two things matter the most to Kiribati - climate change and economic success. In respect of climate change, Kiribati is predicted to be one of the countries most impacted by climate change due to its vulnerability to sea-level rise since it is less than 2 meters above sea level (Rosen, 2021). Kiribati is already facing the impacts of climate change in the form of flooding, contamination of water sources, and food scarcity (Rosen, 2021). In respect of economy, most of Kiribati's income comes from fishing in its biodiverse coral reefs.

For Kiribati, climate change and its economy go hand in hand as Kiribati's economy relies on fishing exports including foreign government aid, coconut exports, and tourism, all of which are threatened by sea-level rise (Rosen, 2021). As such, Kiribati approach to dealing with competing countries should be evaluated in conjunction with its internal development policy. The Kiribati 20-year Vision is its long-term development blueprint for the period 2016-2036 which aims to transform Kiribati into a wealthier, healthier and peaceful country (Office of Te Beretitenti).

Kiribati's attitude towards the strategic competition in the region can be deduced from the comments of the former President of Kiribati Anote Tong in relation to high level visits since 2011 (at the Launch of the Pacific International Relations Forum of the School of Government, Development and International Affairs of the University of the South Pacific in 2012) where he stated:

All these visits clearly indicate interest on the part of these countries in engaging with our region. This is a new experience for our region and, quite frankly, I for one have not been able to fully analyse the reason for this new level of engagement on the part of these countries, and the implications for our foreign relations as individual countries and as a region. I must, however, be honest in saying that I find these initiatives most welcome indeed and worthy of close scrutiny. It is nice to be relevant.

Kiribati's current President Taneti Maamau in an interview with the Guardian in 2021 said "international co-operation would be on Kiribati's terms and that he would not accept large loans 'from any country'" (The Guardian, 2021). Maamau also stated:

The strategy is still in development but clearly identifies raising our islands as a way forward in our fight against climate change. This is also clearly demonstrated in our national climate change policy. (The Guardian, 2021)

In terms of Kiribati's relationship with China, these two countries first established official diplomatic relations in 1980 during the diplomatic competition between Beijing and Taipei. However, in 2003, Kiribati recognised diplomatic relations with Taipei which led to Beijing severing its relations with the Island nation after strong opposition. Furthermore, China dismantled a satellite tracking station it had set up in Kiribati in 1997 as part of its 'monitoring and control network for supporting satellite and carrier rocket launchings' (Parliament of Australia). However, in September 2019, Kiribati restored the diplomatic relations with China following termination of diplomatic relations with Taiwan. Soon after, the two countries signed a memorandum of understanding that brought the island nation into China's Belt and Road infrastructure initiative. On 15 May 2020, China reopened its embassy in Kiribati.

In May 2021, Kiribati announced it was in talks with China regarding upgrading an airstrip on the remote island of Kanton, for the purposes of improving transport links and bolstering tourism. According to Pala (2020), Kiribati's switch from Taiwan to China gives China the possibility of gaining a foothold in Christmas Island, the world's biggest atoll located just 1,300 miles south of Honolulu, home to the U.S. Pacific Command. Pala (2020) argues that building port facilities on Christmas Island, supposedly for tourism, is capable of use by Chinese warships, and is a concern for the US military.

However, so far as Kiribati is concerned, diplomatic ties with China supports its climate change security concerns and national development interests. By engaging with China, Kiribati has created an opportunity for itself as China is willing to integrate the Belt and Road Initiative with Kiribati's 20-Year Vision development plan (CGTN, 2020). Kiribati is seeking assistance from China to raise its islands above the ocean as part of its fight against sea-level rise, "seeking to secure the archipelagic nation's future" (The Guardian, 2021). Kiribati is also seeking "technical assistance" from China to transform a block of land the government of Kiribati bought in Fiji half a decade ago

into a commercial farm to help feed the i-Kiribati people (Pala, 2021). This land was apparently bought to serve as a refuge when their country disappeared under a rising ocean.

In dealing with China, Kiribati has been careful not to break its ties with its metropolitan partners. Once again, with its internal development policies and security concerns in mind, Kiribati has opted to actively engage with both China and its old regional partner such as Australia, New Zealand and U.S. through the strategic power competition. In respect of Kiribati's relationship with U.S., it signed the Treaty of Friendship in 1979 and in the following year, full diplomatic relations were established. The Treaty was subject to termination after 10 years of coming into effect, but Kiribati and U.S. continue to affirm it as a framework for maintaining bilateral relations (McGann, 2020). Although the U.S. has no consular or diplomatic facilities in Kiribati, it has officers of the U.S. Embassy in Fiji who are "concurrently" accredited to Kiribati and make regular visits (US Department of State). While Kiribati does not have an embassy in U.S., it does have a permanent representative to the United Nations in New York who is accredited as ambassador to the U.S. (U.S. Department of State).

Since 2008, when China enhanced its engagement in the Pacific, U.S. has shown renewed interest in Kiribati and the two countries have signed a ship-riders agreement that allows U.S. to increase protection of Kiribati's EEZ (McGann; 2020). Moreover, United States Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM) has made Kiribati a key element of its Pacific Partnership Program. In 2016, the American Shelf Kiribati (ASK) was established in partnership with the Kiribati Ministry of Education and Kiribati National Library and Archives, which holds a collection of reference and literacy material on American history, culture, education, landmarks, art, environment and many more at the Kiribati National Library in Tarawa. Further, U.S. has also made headway in the area of fighting against climate change with Kiribati. President Joe Biden has pledged to make US a leader in climate finance by supporting nations worst hit by climate change and with the least resources to cope. In April 2021, U.S. has proposed new law that aims to establish an immigration pathway to "admit climate-displaced" individuals into US (Congress, 2021).

Although the Australian Government website states that Australia and Kiribati enjoy close and longstanding relations, Kiribati has had its share of concerns about Australia, in particular its approach to climate change. In an interview, former President Anote Tong expressed his nation's "disgust" at Australia's lack of leadership on climate change and said the renewed interest from

Canberra could be dismissed (ABC News, 2019). In relation to Kiribati's views on Australia vs China, he said:

It's really about the lesser of the two evils, I guess.... And at the moment, Australia is coming up as the worst of two evils, and there's got to be a better understanding, there's got to be a more ... respectful way of understanding each other. The dialogue, the conversation has to carry on. It cannot be dictated by the coal industry in the background. (ABC News, 2019)

Although Australia announced it was adopting a target of net zero carbon emissions by 2050, Anote Tong says Australia's actions raise questions over how sincere it is in honouring its commitments at COP26 (SBS News, 2021). Nonetheless, China's rise in the region and Kiribati's increasing engagement with China has prompted Australia to expand its seasonal worker schemes for Pacific workers, and move towards a longer stay, multi-visa arrangement under its Pacific Labour Scheme. This move is central to Australia's step-up program with the Pacific. Kiribati has indicated it now expects this scheme will evolve into a permanent migration scheme. Australia is currently assisting Kiribati strengthen its health system and deliver essential health services in addition to providing Covid-19 Kiribati testing cartridges, medical equipment, personal protective equipment and other supplies (Government of Australia). According to the Government of Australia, it is redesigning its support for basic education to take account of the impact of COVID-19 on the delivery of education services. These works are part of Australia's step-up program in response to China's rise in the region.

So far as New Zealand is concerned, it has worked closely with Kiribati and allowed i-Kiribati to migrate to New Zealand in the event they had an offer of a job (SBS News, 2021). New Zealand is also the only country presently offering a permanent labour migration program from Kiribati. These two countries have also had various high-level visits amidst China's heightened engagement with the island nation. For instance, the Minister of Foreign Affairs Winston Peters led a delegation to Kiribati in February 2019 as part of a mission to the Pacific region while Kiribati President HE Taneti Maamau, Minister of Transport Willie Tokataake and Minister of Transport Willie Tokataake visited New Zealand in 2018 and 2019 (Government of New Zealand). In respect of fight against climate change, during COP26, New Zealand announced its new Nationally Determined Contribution to reduce emissions by 50% on 2005 levels by 2030 (The Conversation, 2021).

a. *Kiribati – Economic Impact and Development Aid*

Kiribati has welcomed the attention from China and its nervous old Western partners. Kiribati has identified an opportunity in the rise of China and the strategic competition in the region to address its developmental needs. By increasing its engagement with China, while maintaining its relations with regional partners, this strategy has enabled to use the strategic competition to fulfill its internal development policy and address its economic challenges. For instance, Kiribati is efficaciously negotiating China's assistance to upgrade facilities on the island of Kanton which, if goes according to Kiribati's plan, will be a monumental step towards its internal development policy. A spokesperson from the Government of Kiribati said:

The Government of Kiribati remains grateful to partners who have responded to this critical infrastructure need and in particular the Government of the People's Republic of China for extending grant support that will enable a feasibility study to be carried out in Kanton to support the long-term vision of the Government of Kiribati.... (Power, 2021).

Another area where Kiribati used the geo-strategic competition in pursuit of its own benefit was in late 2014 when it sold most of the available fishing days "in secret" to China and Taiwan (Field, 2014). The U.S. had offered US\$90 million for 8,300 fishing days for 2015, which was agreed amongst the Pacific states. However, Kiribati withdrew a sizeable portion of its days and offered it to Asian states, allegedly Taiwan and China (Field, 2014). The strategic competition enabled Kiribati to use its extensive EEZ and negotiate a large return. Furthermore, the Government of Kiribati partnered with Chinese-backed companies to set up a fish processing plant which was completed in 2012, costed more than US\$8 million and now employs around two hundred i-Kiribati (Paskal, 2020). According to Paskal (2020), this is something Kiribati desperately needed to get value added from their vast fisheries.

The U.S., under its Pacific Partnership Program created in response to China's growing influence, has assisted Kiribati to construct a steel and concrete bridge between Tarawa's northern and southern atolls U.S. (McGann, 2019). Further, the USAID funds regional projects which assists communities in "accessing financing, building institutional capacity, and adapting to climate change" (U.S. Department of State). According to the U.S. Department of State, it is undertaking climate finance assessments and supporting scale up of successful multi-sectoral projects; the Pacific American Climate Fund (PACAM, 2013-2019) built the capacity of small local grantees to

adapt to climate change while assisting helping improve water supply and management; and also supplies U.S. Coast Guard and U.S. Navy air assets to search and rescue operations as well as regional Forum Fisheries Agency operations that help Kiribati protect earnings from fishing licenses in its EEZ (U.S. Department of State).

Australia is one of the top donors for Kiribati. As part of Australia's Pacific Step Up in response to china's rise in the region, Australia has provided approximately \$17.5 million in bilateral climate change and disaster resilience support to Kiribati since 2016 by way of many programs, including in the infrastructure, education and governance sectors (Government of Australia).

As part of the Pacific Reset in response to China's heightened engagement in the Pacific, New Zealand has scaled up its development cooperation in Kiribati and is working closely with Kiribati to overcome the challenges it faces due to climate change and realise its ambitions set out in its internal development policy - KV20. The President of Kiribati, Taneti Maamau has said that "we are also working with New Zealand's National Institute of Water and Atmospheric Research to develop a long-term coastal security strategy for Kiribati" (Pala; 2020). Under New Zealand's 2018-2021 Development Funding, New Zealand has improved transparency of fisheries revenues; provided technical assistance in relation to increasing the value added in the Kiribati fishing industry; provided contraception through the Healthy Families initiative; established effective rubbish collection and landfill management; improved management of Kiribati's sovereign wealth fund; constructed 62 high density housing units in South Tarawa; improved water security for South Tarawa through the funding of a reverse osmosis plant in Betio; increased access to telecommunications for the population of South Tarawa and rehabilitated more than half the electricity substations in South Tarawa (MFAT).

7. Analysis - Kiribati

Kiribati, despite being a small state, has displayed that is not powerless when confronted by the great power rivalry. Instead, the Government of Kiribati has identified the key challenges faced by its country (that is, economic development and climate change) and have used the strategic competition to obtain greater leverage when barraging over these issues of concern. The rise of China has been welcomed by Kiribati as it has presented it with options. Further, the rise of China has resulted in Kiribati's traditional partners becoming more accommodating towards Kiribati's needs. Essentially, Kiribati strategy has been to use the strategic competition on to gain in areas

such as its internal development policies and fight against climate change without siding with either China or its traditional Western players.

8. Analysis – Overall

Samoa and Kiribati are openly and actively engaging with both China and their traditional Western partners to fulfil their respective internal development policies and security concerns, such as climate change. They have been able to entice their traditional partners namely, Australia, New Zealand and the U.S. into the region through engagement with China. Whether or not the enticement is premeditated is questionable, but it is undisputed that the rise of China has compelled the traditional Western powers to step up and increase their engagement in the region, including Samoa and Kiribati, to maintain their influence in the region. As such, by increasing their engagement with China, Samoa and Kiribati have not only progressed with their internal development policies and security concerns, but also induced the Metropolitan players into increasing their economic and diplomatic engagement with these countries.

It is important to note that while these two Island states have demonstrated wariness in engaging with China, (especially when assessing whether the Chinese aid is in the countries' best interest), they have denied the "China threat". They have not taken sides with any competing country and continue to maintain strong relations with their traditional regional partners. Essentially, the strategy employed by Samoa and Kiribati allows them to maintain ties with both sides while not being tied to one particular power.

CHAPTER 6

Discussion and Conclusion

This chapter sums up the key findings derived from earlier chapters and empirical observations drawn from case studies in respect of how Pacific Island countries are managing growing strategic competition in the region, what strategies and policies they are adopting to deal with the rise of China and how their other partners, especially the U.S., Australia and New Zealand, factor into the equation.

The findings reveal that Pacific Island countries, despite their small size, are not choosing either balancing or bandwagoning in regard to growing strategic competition in the region. Rather, the Pacific states are exhibiting hedging and non-alignment behaviour towards the competing countries, albeit at varying degrees, at regional, subregional and individual state level with the intention to maximise economic and diplomatic returns.

The Pacific Island countries behaviour of hedging and non-alignment does not seem to be determined by their concern over the growing power gap or having to choose sides. Instead, their behaviour is propelled by their own domestic (and regional) needs and security concerns. At the regional level, the key issues for the Pacific Island countries are regional self-determination, climate change, ocean management, sustainable development and humanitarian assistance. These key issues are also present at the individual state level in addition to ensuring autonomy in their foreign policies and prioritising their domestic development policies and interests. As such, the Island nations are seeking to fulfill their own political and internal economic needs from the rise of China.

It has been well established that the Pacific Islands are important from a traditional security perspective not only because they provide a buffer against a forward attack on Australia and New Zealand but also poses a threat to the historical Western dominance due to China's increased engagement in the Pacific Islands region. China's growing presence in the region has resulted in the traditional Western partners enhancing their engagement in the Pacific Islands via an array of "step-up (Australia), "resets" (New Zealand), "pledges" (U.S.) and "uplifts" (UK). These fears are not limited to China's rise in the Pacific but also the growing presence of other powers like India, Indonesia, Japan, France and Taiwan. The Western

powers view the Pacific Islands to be vulnerable to strategic manipulation by outside powers and have therefore warned them about the dangers of “economic coercion” and “retribution” in dealing with China (East-West Centre, 2021). However, this thesis establishes that the Pacific Islands leaders see things differently and are charting their own course.

Indeed, the Pacific Island countries are by far the smallest remotest states in the world therefore naturally they are mostly dependent on larger powerful states for aid and assistance. Further, as interest in the Pacific region depleted after Cold War, the depiction that Pacific Island countries are “fragile” and “weak” states due to their smallness, remoteness and aid dependency amplified. For a long time, a few metropolitan countries, especially Australia and New Zealand (to some extent the U.S.), have reigned over the region as primary aid and assistance providers.

However, despite their inherent challenges, the paper establishes that Pacific nations are not powerless before powerful actors. This is largely reflected in how they are continuously refuting the “China threat” narrative pressed by their traditional Western partners. The Pacific leaders recognise the rise of China and growing strategic competition affords them the liberty to focus on their domestic development needs and security concerns. They are mindful of the importance their strategic locations hold for the competing powers and that this gives them higher bargaining leverage over the competing powers. They recognise they are no longer pressed to work with the few Western powers anymore and that China’s rise in the region has resulted in their traditional partners becoming more accommodating towards their needs. As such, Pacific states are seeking to utilise relations with China to pursue their own interests.

The Pacific Islands (at the regional level and so far as the three case studies on Fiji, Samoa and Kiribati are concerned) are neither adopting pure-balancing nor pure-bandwagoning vis-a-vis China. The empirical findings demonstrate that while on the one hand the Island states have visibly not formed an alliance with China, they are also not exhibiting subservient behaviour towards the other competing countries. Instead, so far as the four case studies are concerned, the Pacific Island countries are adopting a middle position by pursuing a hedging approach – a position between pure-balancing and pure- bandwagoning. It is sensible to

expect the small Island states' aspiration to cultivate a more balanced relations with different big powers during this strategic competition in the Pacific region and not want to put all its eggs into a single basket (Kuik, 2010).

Goh (2005) defines hedging as a set of strategies aimed at "avoiding a situation in which states cannot decide upon more straightforward alternatives such as balancing, bandwagoning, or neutrality" and thus adopt a middle position that forestalls or avoids having to choose one side. Kuik (2008), on the other hand, defines hedging as an approach where "smaller states adopt policies aimed at maximizing economic and diplomatic benefits from the rising power" while also taking some "opposite and counteracting measures that are aimed at keeping all options open".

Both Goh and Kuik provide apt definitions for hedging under different circumstances. So far as Pacific Island countries are concerned, they are adopting hedging approach primarily to maximize benefits from the competing countries while maintaining autonomy in their foreign policies. They are hedging in their own, the "Pacific Way".

At a regional level, the Pacific states are seeking to enhance their international position by utilising Pacific regionalism to share their common concerns and interests. The Pacific states have clearly identified their vital security concern - climate change and their central principle – sovereignty and autonomy. As such, they are using the key regional/subregional institutions such as PIF, PDIF, MSG and PSIDS to address their security concerns and pursue their common interests via the formation of their own "Blue Pacific" narrative.

The author agrees with Kuik (2010) that in order to compensate for their inherent disadvantages in size and strength, smaller states forge trade and functional cooperation with like-minded countries at the regional level to acquire foreign policy gains. Kuik argues that small and militarily weak states are "more likely than the big powers to place more emphasis and rely more on institutionalized cooperation as a primary policy option".

Similarly, Pacific nations have adopted the policy option under Pacific regionalism whereby member states regularly consult with each other with the intention to

produce positive and mutually beneficial outcomes through the various key regional/subregional institutions. They are seeking to use their collective agency and forming competitive relationships with the competing countries with the intention to ultimately entice the competing countries to concede to their demands. This approach is proving to be valuable for Pacific Islands in that it provides a platform for them to compensate for their innate disadvantages in size and limited range of resources, allows them to gain additional bargaining leverage and gives them considerable degree of political equality with the more powerful actors.

While the Pacific Island countries are adopting mixed strategies, they are doing this in their own way with emphasis on their regional identity and their preferences for autonomous foreign policies. This is reflected in their behaviours and attitudes at both regional and individual state level. The “Pacific Way” has become the philosophy behind Pacific Island countries response to rise of China and growing strategic competition. The findings support Wendt’s (1994) definition of collective identity as "positive identification with the welfare of another, such that the other is seen as a cognitive extension of the self, rather than independent" and that this identity forms the basis for “feelings of solidarity, community, and loyalty” towards collective interests and concerns.

The Pacific Islands have largely been successful in their approaches and strategies by using their collective sovereignty and agency under Pacific regionalism and to reshape the image of the region from remote and fragile to being resilient custodians of a vast ocean continent by putting forward the “Blue Pacific” narrative and embracing the “Pacific Way”.

At an individual state level, Pacific states are leveraging the strategic competition to diversify their own diplomatic and economic ties to fulfill their internal development needs and security concerns, as seen in the case studies of Fiji, Samoa and Kiribati. It is an expected and a sensible approach for the Pacific Islands to seek out other international relationships. The adoption of hedging and non-alignment behaviour has presented the Pacific Island countries with the opportunity to diversify their diplomatic and political links allowing them to fulfill their domestic needs while lowering the risks of over-dependence on a few partners.

Scholars and politicians in Western liberal democracies have argued that Pacific Islands are “vulnerable to strategic manipulation” and “economic coercion” by outside powers, especially China (East-West Centre, 2021). The Pacific Island countries, on the other hand, are firmly upholding their sovereignty and adopting autonomous foreign and security policies by denying the “China threat”. Pacific Island leaders, such as former PIF secretary general Dame Meg Taylor, have attempted to neutralize narratives of strategic competition by rejecting “the terms of the dilemma which presents the Pacific with a choice between a China alternative and our traditional partners” (Taylor, 2018) and have made it clear that they “will not be forced into a foreign policy position by anyone” (Delaibatiki, 2016).

Fundamentally, the strategic choice of hedging and non-alignment adopted by Pacific states is the result of their regional and domestic development and economic needs and common security concerns. With this in mind, they do not see China as a threat, but as a friend. They see the rise of China as an opportunity that has elevated and bolstered their negotiating position and allows them to maintain their autonomy and regional identity. As described by the former PIF secretary general, “if there is one word that might resonate amongst all Forum members when it comes to China, that word is access. Access to markets, technology, financing, infrastructure. Access to a viable future” (Taylor, 2018).

As seen at both the regional and individual state level, the Pacific nations are obtaining greater leverage with competing countries when bargaining over key issues of concern such as climate change and development projects. By adopting to engage with China, the Pacific states have forced their traditional Western partners to rethink their attitudes towards the region and respect their autonomy and regional identity. Competing powers such as U.S., Australia, New Zealand and China are embracing benign and accommodating foreign policies towards the Pacific. As a result, the Pacific Island countries are getting greater access to aid, infrastructure projects, concessional loans, military assistance, as well as influence on the international stage.

The findings support the literature on hedging that notwithstanding their inherent disadvantages, smaller states retain a certain degree of influence, particularly in times of power shift, with the goal of promoting their political autonomy. This thesis finds that Pacific states are seeking to diversify their diplomatic and economic links with

emphasis on their policy of “friend to all and enemies to none” with measures such as developing economic and diplomatic ties with China and other competing powers, maintaining friendly relations with all nations, avoiding alignment with any particular power, and participating actively in world affairs that serves the interests of the Island nations, such as climate change.

The findings support IR literature on hedging, in particular Kuik (2010), that smaller states do not choose between balancing (siding with an established hegemon to balance against a rising power) and bandwagoning (siding with a rising power) in circumstances of high uncertainties and high stakes. As rational actors, smaller states are not likely to place all eggs in a basket. Instead, they tend to exhibit hedging behaviour with the intention to maximize economic and diplomatic returns while avoiding the risk of sticking to one single power.

This thesis is a preliminary study of Pacific Island countries’ approach to managing growing strategic competition and rise of China in the region. There were many limitations faced when conducting this study, mostly due to Covid-19. Face-to-face interviews, questionnaires, surveys, etc., were halted due to travel restrictions and intended participants pressing commitments and/or circumstances. The limitations also extended on how the research was conducted as material was limited to what is available on the internet due to library closures and movement restrictions. As a result, case study selection also presents limitations to the study. Ideally, more case studies, such as Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Papua New Guinea, Tuvalu and Palau, would have been selected to provide a more comprehensive and representative analysis.

It should also be noted that since this study concluded, there has been immense development in the Pacific region in respect of the strategic competition, for example Solomon Islands’ security deal with China, which has not been covered in this thesis.

As discussed in Chapter 1, there is an obvious gap in literature as most discussions on this topic are from the point of view of big powers. However, based on the findings and discussion above, it can be concluded that Pacific Island countries are inaccurately portrayed as “fragile” and “weak” states. In fact, the Pacific states have exerted a great deal of control on how the rise of China and growing strategic

competition in the region is being played and shaped by adopting various mixed strategies.

In light of the gap in literature and the limitations of this study, the author is of the view that more research should be conducted to explore how Pacific Islands are managing the great power competition and rise of China in the region. Future work should focus on Pacific perspective to adequately explain the great power competition in the Pacific.

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