***China in the Pacific Islands: Beyond the ‘Bad Dragon’ Narrative***

***中國大陸與太平洋島國─睦鄰外交之實踐***

***By Kao-Cheng Wang 王高成 and Fabrizio Bozzato 杜允士***

***Abstract*** - China’s foot-print in the Pacific Islands is increasing rapidly and continuously. Beijing is now the region’s second largest trading partner and one of its largest aid donors. In island countries once relegated to geopolitical irrelevance, Chinese money is pouring into infrastructure and construction projects. But the Asian giant’s expanding presence in the region has come with problems, ranging from China’s now quiescent diplomatic rivalry with Taiwan to the opaqueness and negative externalities of its aid activities. In particular, the growing Chinese influence is changing the strategic ecosystem and challenging some of the old assumptions about regional security. Nowadays, when it comes to defence and security in the South Pacific, China is always part of the discussion. Moreover, the established partners of the region fear that Beijing is displacing their influence, locking natural resources up, and pursuing long-term strategic ambitions. Often, Western officials and analysts have responded to China’s engagement with the region by adopting the popular threat narrative so frequently invoked in the debate about the People’s Republic’s role in the wider Asia-Pacific. As a result, a geopolitical discourse has been constructed using multiple negative frames depicting China as hostile, predatory, and even morally alien. This regime of representation, which portrays China as a wilful security threat in a zero-sum game, hinges on little evidence and is revealing of the unease of actors losing their comfortable and exclusive status of regional powers. More worryingly, it postulates the futility of implementing socialization strategies toward China. By contrast, acknowledging that China does not necessarily pose a threat to Western and Pacific Island interests and is, on the contrary, a resource for the region would liberate synergies for enhancing stability and security. If the “bad dragon” narrative is defused, then the South Pacific can be seen as and become an important laboratory to test cooperation models with China.

***Keywords:*** Pacific Island region; “China threat”; Regime of representation; Regional security

*“In asserting a ‘China threat’ to Australian and New Zealand interests in the South Pacific, many commentators have framed a regional political environment where influence is zero-sum, policy approaches conflict, and Pacific Island Countries (PICs) are reduced to static facets of a geopolitical ‘chessboard’.”* [Matthew Hill, *Chessboard or ‘Political Bazaar’? Revisiting Beijing, Canberra and Wellington’s Engagement with the South Pacific*, 2010]

*“China’s rising influence will require major adjustments in the Pacific, not least for countries like Australia which must naturally look askance at the reality of another player in the region, and a very major one at that. But influencing China's role should be possible and can best be achieved by cooperation rather than confrontation.”* [Michael Powles, *China: ‘Beijing - Guardian of the Pacific’?* 2007]

***Introduction***

Over the last decade the People Republic of China’s (PRC) presence in the Pacific Islands Region has been growing spectacularly and omni-directionally. Political-diplomatic relations, aid programs, economic exchanges, and virtually all declensions of soft and sticky power, both by governmental and private-sector actors, are on the rise.[[1]](#footnote-1) Under many respects, China’s influence in the region appears bound to rival that of Australia and New Zealand, the established regional powers and custodians.[[2]](#footnote-2) In the two antipodean countries, political figures, academics and journalists have often responded to China’s grand entrance onto the Islands stage by expressing deep concern about the PRC’s strengthening Pacific connections and evoking scenarios in which China becomes the regional hegemon.[[3]](#footnote-3) Even though the initial driver of Beijing engagement with the region was the Mainland’s diplomatic rivalry with the Republic of China / Taiwan, the new course in cross-Strait relations and the stepping up of diplomatic and economic connections with the Pacific Island states after 2008, have redrawn the lines of the ‘China discourse’ in the region.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Substantial scholarly and media analysis, and preoccupation over China’s intentions, have been formulated and voiced in neo-realist terms. In other words, many observers have been - and are - looking at the Pacific Islands regional system as a zero-sum environment under the tyranny of competition.[[5]](#footnote-5) Although the lenses of realism may explain the ‘China threat’ angle characterizing much analysis on Beijing’s increasing footprint regionally and globally, a deeper and more comprehensive investigation is in order. As Sullivan and Renz intelligently ask, “why, for example, in the case of Sino-African relations, do discursive patterns employed by Western media systematically endorse images of African weakness, Western trusteeship and Chinese ruthlessness?”[[6]](#footnote-6) Actually, the matrix of Western images of China is the West itself, with its ideas, perceptions and fears being projected onto the Asian giant. For instance, a research on British media reactions to China in Africa reveals a bifurcated narrative featuring a dichotomy between “a sometimes mistaken, but essentially well-intentioned West and the amoral, greedy and coldly indifferent Chinese battling over a corrupt and/or helpless Africa.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

The rationale of this paper is to examine a similar narrative which has been constructed for representing and explaining China’s presence in the Pacific Islands, where Australia and New Zealand play the role of post-colonial powers, established partners, major aid donors, and security providers. Like European post-colonial powers claim a special relationship with African states and sub-regions, the antipodean pair traditionally consider the South Pacific their ‘special patch’,[[8]](#footnote-8) “overseeing security and development in Polynesia (New Zealand) and Melanesia (Australia) in an informal division of labour with the United States (Micronesia and the North Pacific).”[[9]](#footnote-9) Similarly to the European former metropolises which, in the mid-2000s, were very reluctant to come to terms with China’s new role in Africa, or even preferred to live in denial of the Sinicization process of the continent,[[10]](#footnote-10) so Canberra and Wellington have long-refrained from acknowledging not to mention accepting China crossing the fence and threading onto their ‘backyard’.[[11]](#footnote-11) Then, after the ‘big realization’ of the Chinese dragon’s Pacific (and peaceful) encroachment, Australian and New Zealand have been running their narrative factories full steam, spawning a discourse about China’s role in the Islands which simultaneously exorcizes, stigmatizes and domesticates the ‘mighty beast’.[[12]](#footnote-12) Such a narrative choice speaks volumes about the two countries’ attitude towards China, the Pacific island nations, and their perceived place and insecurities in the region.

***1. Representing and misrepresenting China in the Pacific Islands***

Usually, the concept of power is associated with direct physical power. However it should also be understood in broader cultural and symbolic terms, including the power to represent someone or something in a certain way - within a certain ‘regime of representation’. Symbolic power is the way in which an exhibition constructs and persuades meaning through demonstrating a path through meaning. Pierre Bourdieu defines symbolic power as “the power to make people see and believe certain visions of the world rather than others.”[[13]](#footnote-13) A particular way to exercise symbolic power against a given somebody is stereotyping: a practice employed to construct negative representations of people and groups. “Stereotyping also deploys a strategy of splitting - where those who do not fit society’s norms are excluded, and their exclusion is copper-fastened by fitting them to a set of stereotypes deemed unacceptable - the ‘Other’. This denies the possibility of any meaningful discourse about them or with them, and ensures their continued exclusion. This proves most effective when gross inequalities of power allow the dominant group to employ the strategy without challenge.”[[14]](#footnote-14)

Australia and New Zealand are actually unable to exclude China from the Pacific Islands Region. The geopolitical event horizon has already been crossed. There is no way back. The Cold War era ‘good old days’ will not return. China is in Oceania to stay.[[15]](#footnote-15) The choice that the two antipodean nations now have is about how to represent China in the South Pacific to themselves in order to design regional policies of exclusion or socialization.[[16]](#footnote-16) Unfortunately, it appears that, at media level, they have chosen the former option: stereotyping the Chinese. China is often depicted by Australian and New Zealand (and, more generally, Western media) as an ill-intentioned and wily ‘other’ which is hungrily roaming the Pacific Islands region, using adjectives such as ‘ravenous’, ‘prowling’ and ‘exploitative.’ At the same time, China is described as un-empathetic and opportunistic, an actor adopting behaviours which are defined as ‘indifferent’, ‘stealthy’ and ‘cunning.’[[17]](#footnote-17)

Although there is a growing recognition for the economic *elan vital* that Beijing is effecting in the Islands, that is frequently juxtaposed to references to China’s supposedly un-orthodox economic practices. “Currency manipulation, violation of market rules, lack of quality assurance and inferior standards feature prominently.”[[18]](#footnote-18) The social consequences of economic growth in China such as increasing social polarization, human rights violations, environmental problems etc. are seen as quintessential Chinese exports. Against this negative depiction, the positive connotation of Australia, New Zealand and the West in general, stands in juxtaposition. In a Manichean fashion, Western ‘good’ values and practices are contrasted with China’s entirely utilitarian ethics and policies. Moreover, critiques of Chinese practices are sometimes constructed and advanced simply on the grounds of China’s ‘otherness’.[[19]](#footnote-19) Several publications even highlight elements of characterization casting bad light on China. For example, Beijing is accused of violating norms associated with human rights and democratic standards. Further points of salience, such as the CPC’s atheism and the PRC’s unquenchable thirst for resources, are highlighted as potentially disruptive of traditional Pacific island equilibria and lifestyles.[[20]](#footnote-20)

Notably, ‘the Chinese’ are regularly identified as a homogenous group, a cohesive leviathan. And even when the diversity among Chinese actors in the region is acknowledged, that is often instrumental to negative descriptions of the ‘sons of the dragon’.[[21]](#footnote-21) Like the Chinese, Pacific Island actors are also frequently presented as ‘one lot’. The Pacific islanders mentioned and examined by Western media are mostly elites, particularly opportunistic, or morally reprehensible and greedy, politicians. Western analysis of how the increasing Chinese presence is impacting the life of the islanders usually prefers anecdotal narrative, which can be easily employed to emphasize the pernicious effects of Chinese illegal migration, extensive fishing, aggressive entrepreneurship *et similia*.[[22]](#footnote-22) Such regime of representation mirrors prior research on China in Africa and Latin America, and it is revealing of the patterns of established / traditional powers’ discursive response to Beijing’s accession and expansion into their perceived sphere of influence.[[23]](#footnote-23) One vector of this narrative is the postulate that, unlike those of the Chinese, the activities of Western governmental and private sector actors are informed by clear ethical principles and constraints. This moral juxtaposition is clearly conducive to the kind of image that the Sydney Morning Herald formulates as “the totalitarian super-bogey”[[24]](#footnote-24) exploiting the political, economic and social vulnerabilities of the island nations without any moral constraints. Unbound by the moral inhibitors embedded into Australia and New Zealand’s ethos, China is free to “exploit the situation,”[[25]](#footnote-25) “seize chance in turmoil,”[[26]](#footnote-26) “buy influence and favours,”[[27]](#footnote-27) and so on.

Concurrently, the moral connection or elective affinity between China and the (supposedly) morally flawed and inept island elites is either subtly hinted or explicitly stated. For example, the “communist giant’s”[[28]](#footnote-28) authoritarian system was constantly factored into the media coverage equation of Beijing’s “remarkable warmth towards the latest unelected Fijian government.”[[29]](#footnote-29) In substance, China was accused of sabotaging Canberra and Wellington’s policies and programmes for fostering good governance standards and social development in Fiji and the Pacific Island countries. Although numerous articles examined by Sullivan and Renz “noted positive effects arising from of China’s economic activities in the region, economic actors are often portrayed as uniquely calculated, opportunistic and uncaring.”[[30]](#footnote-30) Similarly, economic cooperation with Beijing is denounced as exclusively in China’s interests. This assertion is often coupled with the remark that the Chinese flood the Islands with low-quality goods while exploiting their natural resources.[[31]](#footnote-31)

Moreover, Chinese companies and investors, unlike those from Western countries, are depicted as driven only by greed.[[32]](#footnote-32) According to this narrative, Chinese investments hardly benefit local economies, and Beijing systematically assists its companies with hiring Chinese contractors and cheap labour from the motherland. Where the local economies have benefited from employment opportunities created by the Chinese, nonetheless local workers have been suffering because of the poor safety conditions and mobbing by their Asian employers. “Such is China’s disregard for liberal economic norms and indifference to human and labour rights that it seeks, as asserted in one article,”[[33]](#footnote-33) “to pay overtime with tinned fish rather than cash.”[[34]](#footnote-34) Also, “look for the China connection!” seems to be the slogan for any debate on local problems in the Pacific Islands. For example, China has been criticized for the environmental costs embedded in each plastic bottle of Fiji Water, because the bottle production plant in China “runs on diesel fuel, 24 hours a day.”[[35]](#footnote-35)

Providing infrastructures is probably China’s favourite avenue of aid because buildings, roads and port facilities are tangible and impressive. However, they can also turn into cases of heterogenesis of ends and exercises in bad publicity. The Pacific Islands, Western media solicitously tell us, count several Chinese monumental ‘white elephants’, “the preferred conduit of aid-for-favours.”[[36]](#footnote-36) More alarmingly, the internal security situation of the Island states is threatened by Chinese criminal syndicates. This may sound gravely disturbing in the absence of sound empirical evidence, but the media discourse generously regales the public with stories and reportages featuring the ethnic Chinese crime web, ‘Chinese mafia’ and gangs.[[37]](#footnote-37) “Reports of murders, prostitution rackets, drug and human smuggling, illegal immigration, money laundering, passport fraud and other nefarious activities are plentiful.”[[38]](#footnote-38)

Tellingly, “there is little differentiation of Chinese actors, nor any concrete numbers, in most reports.”[[39]](#footnote-39) And yet, the Chinese in general are finger-pointed as the cause of rising levels of crime and ethnic tensions. Law-abiding Chinese individuals, or Chinese victims of crime organizations, do not feature frequently. On the contrary, the assertion that Australia and New Zealand will have to suffer and take action against the consequences of Chinese crime, drug trafficking, prostitution and illegal migration in the region. “It is these two nations whose peacekeepers have to pick up the pieces following ethnic riots, in which ethnically Chinese are usually the victim. And it is Australian and New Zealand whose coastguard and border controls face the expensive battle against the flow of narcotics, laundered money, forged documents, counterfeit goods and illegal immigrants.”[[40]](#footnote-40)

Simply put, according to the Western regime of representation, China is not a responsible and cooperative stakeholder,[[41]](#footnote-41) and Beijing does not take responsibility for the pernicious activities of its nationals.[[42]](#footnote-42) In sharp contrast, altruistic and benevolent Canberra and Wellington have to regularly intervene to fix the problems created by ‘the Chinese’ in the Islands.[[43]](#footnote-43) Other articles voice the position that “if China is serious about promoting a harmonious world and being a responsible international actor, it cannot rely on everyone else to do all the heavy lifting.”[[44]](#footnote-44) The most pessimist commentators even maintain that China is culturally unable to become a responsible regional stakeholder, that it cannot be socialized in the South Pacific: “They have different norms. They do not value human life. They are so different from us on so many different levels.”[[45]](#footnote-45) Consequently, China’s grand entrée in the Pacific Islands is seen as the result of Australia and New Zealand’s failure as custodians of the region: “the most worrying development is that for every back-step we take, China strides forward.”[[46]](#footnote-46) As Sullivan and Renz observe, “at the heart of many articles there is a sense of regret and loss.”[[47]](#footnote-47) Due to the antipodean powers’ inaction, the Aussie/Kiwi backyard has been infiltrated by China, whose “insidiousness and corruption of the very political ethos we hold dear and which we helped cultivate in our region seems to threaten attachment to democratic principles and the respect for human rights that underpins them.”[[48]](#footnote-48) With blunt frankness, one analyst even said that “I don’t think we want to have a country [China] with that sort of society having a big influence in our part of the world.”[[49]](#footnote-49)

Despite the strong reference to the benevolence with which the islands have been looked after by Canberra and Wellington, the real emphasis of many articles is on the islanders’ supposed ingratitude to their traditional partners. This suggests that Australia and New Zealand deeply resent the loss of their special status in the region.[[50]](#footnote-50) Again, the island actors receiving the attention of the antipodean media are almost exclusively elites, ‘cartooned’ as lacking moral fibre and politically unsavvy or inept. Some narratives insist on the Island elites’ “rampant corruption” [44], others vilify some governments as “totalitarian rulers”[[51]](#footnote-51) and “dodgy” and “insignificant pariah regimes”[[52]](#footnote-52)of the South Pacific. *Ca va sans dire*, those assumingly rotten-to-the-marrow Island elites and the cunning Chinese officials are a perfect match. The islands’ leaders enthusiastically play the China card[[53]](#footnote-53) and are more than willing to become Beijing’s pawns in the Pacific.[[54]](#footnote-54) In contrast to China’s ‘dollar diplomacy’, Australia and New Zealand are committed to eradicate corruption and champion democracy, and never compromise on good governance in return for aid.[[55]](#footnote-55) Island elites usually do not understand such moral high stand but, as commentators in Sydney or Auckland remark, they have to “consider growing up” rather than responding with “tantrums” and general “childishness”.[[56]](#footnote-56) The traditional guardians “maintain their principled support for the islands despite being keenly aware that China is ‘always ready to prey on’ any fallings out. But, since financial competition with Beijing is unthinkable, the antipodean couple has to “demonstrable goodwill, contact and genuine assistance […] Australia does care for its neighbours.”[[57]](#footnote-57) This said, “it is does not escape commentators that in a zero sum game with the ruthless Chinese, sentiment is not the weapon of choice.”[[58]](#footnote-58) As the then Australian Foreign Minister Bob Carr said in 2012, China’s presence in the South Pacific is now a ‘fact of life’. “My message really is that Australia and New Zealand have got to live with the fact that China will want to deliver aid in this part of the world (and) there is nothing we can do to stop it,”[[59]](#footnote-59) Carr stated. No narrative, no regime of representation can change this reality and its implications.

***2. Breaking the ‘China Threat’ Spell***

“The message at the litany view of the ‘China threat’ argument is one of fear.”[[60]](#footnote-60) The characteristics of this level is that it is the most superficial, appeals to mass readership and fails “to probe beneath the surface of social and cultural life.”[[61]](#footnote-61) With regard to the Pacific Islands region, the central concern here is China’s potential not only for greatly complicating Australia and New Zealand’s regional interests but also to seek dominance in the Islands. However, “abstraction is a perilous approach to the reality of China.”[[62]](#footnote-62) “Fear is the mind-killer,” would ideally remark Frank Herbert, the author of *Dune*.[[63]](#footnote-63) It might be added that it is also a cooperation and socialization killer. Even though Australia and New Zealand would never jeopardize their vital relationship with China for the sake of the South Pacific, nonetheless the *leyenda negra* (English: ‘black legend’) constructed under the illusion of countering China’s increasing status and influence on the Islands stage not only alienates Beijing, but also hinders the possibility of collective and synergistic action with China *in* and *for* the region.[[64]](#footnote-64) For this reasons, demonstrating that the ‘China threat’ argument is fundamentally a projection of the insecurities of the traditional Western custodians of the region would validate the need for an inclusive and constructive approach to China’s presence in the Pacific Islands liberating the cooperative potential of a great power.[[65]](#footnote-65)

As Jenny Hayward-Jones observes, “China’s military muscle, the impact of its aid and loans, its investment, and its diplomatic leverage are often mentioned by analysts and officials as evidence that China has geo-strategic ambitions in the Pacific Islands.”[[66]](#footnote-66) These elements are unfailingly used to underpin the ‘bad dragon’ discourse. Thus, the best way to break the ‘China threat’ spell and belie the regime of representation it has created is to focus on the actual Chinese activities in the region rather than on the narrative about what Beijing might be doing or intending to do. “When looked at from this perspective, the three main elements of China’s engagement with the region - aid, trade and investment, and diplomatic and military ties - provide, at best, a weak case for the argument that China has some grand geo-strategic design.”[[67]](#footnote-67) Indeed, “conjecture about China’s ambitions should be moderated by a sober assessment of what China is doing in the Pacific Islands.”[[68]](#footnote-68) But even if China did have a hidden long-term agenda, an analysis of these three areas reveals that China is significantly able to disturb but, at the same time, substantially unable to change a regional order revolving around and underpinned by a group of Western powers having multiple, long-standing and profound connections with the Pacific Islands nations.[[69]](#footnote-69)

***3. Chinese Aid to the Pacific Islands***

China’s involvement in the South Pacific region is logically much smaller than in other parts of the world, although its impact on Pacific Island nations is significant. Since the Pacific Island nations are traditionally regarded as being under the Western ‘sphere of influence’, China’s political and economic engagement over the last decade has caused concern amongst some policymakers and commentators, especially in Australia and New Zealand. Given that the large majority of the Pacific Island states are micro-states, the effects of Chinese foreign aid are very evident both to the Island nations and donors alike.[[70]](#footnote-70) Yet, the understanding of the dynamics, practices, and even the principles and objectives of the PRC’s generosity remain superficial and incomplete.[[71]](#footnote-71) As a result, there are several misconceptions originating in part by Beijing’s own transparency and accountability deficit in releasing details of its aid program, and in part by the tendency of some Western analysts to use Chinese aid processes to uphold their “China Threat” discourses.[[72]](#footnote-72) Actually, the root of those misconceptions is the fact that “Chinese aid is a ‘model with its own characteristics’, though there is no clear declaration of what this actually means.”[[73]](#footnote-73) Chinese foreign aid, globally and in the South Pacific, is provided in three forms: grants and interest-free loans (through state finances) and concessional loans administered through China Eximbank.

For both domestic and international reasons, and unlike ‘traditional donors’, Beijing’s foreign aid does not include an emphasis on democracy, good governance or human rights. This has raised vocal criticism and serious concern in the West.[[74]](#footnote-74) It instead emphasizes the importance of adopting a development model based on each aid recipient’s specificities and aspirations. In this way the PRC tries to distinguish itself from Western donors.[[75]](#footnote-75) Moreover, Beijing promotes the concepts of ‘win-win’, ‘equal partnership’ and ‘mutual benefit’ in all stages of Chinese aid giving.[[76]](#footnote-76) Leaving the official rhetoric aside, like all states, China’s foreign aid programmes are vehicles for furthering its foreign policy agenda. PRC foreign policy analyst Linda Jakobson explains that this agenda is informed by three ‘core interests’: sovereignty, security and development.[[77]](#footnote-77) “She cites high-ranking Chinese foreign policy official, Dai Bingguo, elaborating upon these as: China’s political stability (stability of the CCP leadership and socialist system); sovereign security; and China’s sustainable economic and social development.”[[78]](#footnote-78) Chinese scholars such as Dingconfirms her analysis by indentifying the drivers of China’s foreign policy as “to preserve China’s independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity”, and to “create a favourable international environment for China’s reform and opening up and modernisation construction”. [[79]](#footnote-79) Takaaki Kobayashi casts some additional light on the matter by stressing that “Chinese aid follows the win-win principle and is given in ‘exchange’ for ‘something’ that contributes to its national interest. This ‘something’ may change in different times and with different countries”.[[80]](#footnote-80)

In the debate over Chinese foreign aid and the PRC’ ‘South-South’ cooperation around the world there is the South Pacific region or individual Pacific Island states are mentioned only occasionally. Despite the lack of global attention, China’s role as a donor to the Pacific Islands nations has been increasing sharply, almost dramatically, over the past decade and “offers some interesting and unique insights into the links between aid, resources and investment. […] There is a lot of debate about why China is giving aid to the region.”[[81]](#footnote-81) The often opaque processes of Chinese foreign policy-making and, specifically, its foreign aid programmes, have given arguments and reasons to those self-appointed Cassandras who warn about the ‘threat’ that the Chinese Trojan horse poses to the region. Whilst preoccupation and even suspicion about Beijing’s aid practices are not without justification, the ‘bad dragon’ narrative goes beyond tutiorism and has the disturbing characteristic of overlooking the considerations and logic of the Pacific Island states in choosing their partners as well as the attractiveness of China in comparison to the other aid donors’ appeal.[[82]](#footnote-82)

In the words of Philippa Brant: “Until recently, the dominant Western discourse has presented China’s increased engagement in the South Pacific region as a ‘threat’ to Western (in this case primarily Australia and New Zealand) strategic and development objectives, and has tended to characterize China as a ‘bully’ or ‘dragon’ of which South Pacific nations should be wary.”[[83]](#footnote-83) Australia and New Zealand have traditionally regarded the Pacific Islands region as ‘their special patch’ and their aid policies have vehemently insisted on governance standards and economic liberalization. Australia has also played a significant role as security provider of last resort - as epitomized by the Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI).[[84]](#footnote-84) The failed/ing state and Melanesian Arc of instability discourses have been employed to corroborate a muscular approach ‘forcing’ development assistance onto the Pacific Island nations.[[85]](#footnote-85)

In addition, Canberra and Wellington are currently trying to negotiate a regional free trade agreement known as PACER Plus, but many Pacific governments and NGOs have expressed their concern on the potential effects of the agreement.[[86]](#footnote-86) As a mantic complement to such assertiveness, Western scrutators fathoming China’s grand strategic thinking argue that Beijing harbours a master plan to weaken Western presence and interests in the region,[[87]](#footnote-87) and that it is actively pursuing the Sinicization of the South Pacific through the emigration of Chinese nationals, hence causing a further destabilization of the Island states.[[88]](#footnote-88) Albeit the negative China narrative is increasingly under the scrutiny of factual scholarship, the symbolic mass it has agglutinated still exerts a strong gravitational pull in policymaking and think-tank circles,[[89]](#footnote-89) while China’s activism in the Pacific seems to have revived the embers of long-standing donors’ interest, including Japan, the European Union and the United States. For example, Philippa Brant reveals that a representative from the Japanese Embassy in Fiji admitted that “Japan at the PALM 5 meeting increased its regional aid budget because Chinese Aid in the South Pacific. It saw what China last pledged and wanted to have a little more, so changed the budget.”[[90]](#footnote-90) Such renewed interest should be seen as pre-emptive rather than reactive because, as Jian Yang contends, the South Pacific is not essential to China’s security strategy and Beijing has neither the hard power nor the soft power to become a hegemon in the region in the foreseeable future.[[91]](#footnote-91)

In another meticulously researched 2011 study - *The Pacific Islands in China’s Grand Strategy* - Jian Yang argues that “China is playing an important role in the evolution of the regional order,”[[92]](#footnote-92) but stresses that its influence is not ‘deep-rooted’, and that it has relatively poor connections in non-economic areas. Generally, Chinese scholars acknowledge that China has an appetite for the natural resources of the region, but remark that China’s involvement delivers great development opportunities to the Pacific Island countries. Chinese official and diplomats formulate the same concept in an idealistic fashion. For example, Chinese Minister of Commerce Chen Deming said at the 2008 China-PIC Forum: “Politically, we believe every country, regardless of its size, strength and wealth is an equal member of the international community. We respect the individual choice of PICs for their way of development and their efforts in safeguarding sovereignty and regional stability.”[[93]](#footnote-93) There is normally no denial by the Chinese that Beijing’s activities in the South Pacific, including aid, are predicated on China’s national interest, as they are in the other regional theatres, but what the dominant geopolitical narrative contends in reality is not that China might have a ‘strategic interest’ in the Pacific Islands per se, but rather that it has the potential to affect Western ‘strategic interests’. As one donor representative admitted, “Western donors are just jealous and worried about increased competition.”[[94]](#footnote-94) Actually, the ‘gifts from the bad dragon’ argument is not only hypocritical, but also counterproductive. In fact, it appears that the more these concerns about China are reiterated by Western interlocutors and media, the more they are perceived by recipient communities as scaremongering by Western donors trying to maintain ‘their’ influence over their ‘post-colonial backyard’.[[95]](#footnote-95)

***4. Trade and investment***

The PRC’s trade with the Pacific Islands region has increased by a ratio of seven over the last decade. China’s trade with Papua New Guinea alone increased ten times between 2001 and 2011 to US$1.265 billion.[[96]](#footnote-96) This might sound impressive, but China’s trade with other regions of the world has grown by bigger volumes over the same period; for example, China’s trade with Africa continent increased by a ratio of fifteen - from US$10.6 billion in 2000 to US$160 billion in 2011.[[97]](#footnote-97) Booming trade with China was significantly aided by Beijing’s accession into the World Trade Organization, which inaugurated of a policy of rapid economic globalism for China. But even as China has become the South Pacific’s second largest bilateral trading partner, Australia still enjoys a considerable lead. According to ANZ Bank statistics, China’s total exports to the Pacific in 2011 were US$897 million, well behind Australia’s US$2.6 billion and Singapore’s US$1.98 billion. The Pacific’s exports to China in 2011 summed up to US$1.17 billion, while the region’s exports to Australia in 2011 reached US$4.14 billion.[[98]](#footnote-98) The European Union was the second biggest export market for the Pacific Islands, with exports estimated at US$1.54 billion.[[99]](#footnote-99) The increase in exports from Asian states such as Singapore, the PRC and Malaysia to the Pacific Islands region has been even higher than the rise in exports from Australia; epitomizing the growing importance of Asian partners to Pacific Island economies.

“Chinese companies and investors in the Pacific Islands, mostly from provincial centres in China, have expanded beyond their traditional small retail business focus to the domain of infrastructure and mining.”[[100]](#footnote-100) The rise of China as an investor in the region has been most noticeable in Papua New Guinea, where it has been mainly prompted by the objective of securing access to that country’s massive natural resources. For instance, China’s Metallurgical Group Corporation has invested in the Ramu Nickel Project in Madang, Papua New Guinea, the most sizeable PRC investment in the region.[[101]](#footnote-101) Chinese construction firms are multiplying and performing well in the region, particularly in Papua New Guinea and Fiji. In Papua New Guinea Chinese companies have constructed roads in the Central, Gulf, Morobe and Madang provinces and erected the University of Goroka’s student dormitories.[[102]](#footnote-102)

Notably, Chinese companies often cooperate with other foreign investors and multinational partners to complete projects in the Pacific Islands.[[103]](#footnote-103) “They also compete for and win World Bank and Asian Development Bank tenders in the Pacific Islands, which demand levels of transparency not previously associated with Chinese activities in the region.”[[104]](#footnote-104) This facet of China’s commercial engagement further complicates the perception that Chinese actors in the region are inherently different from Western actors.

China has also become the “new banker creating choice in the region.”[[105]](#footnote-105) In negotiations with Pacific countries, Australia traditionally used to enjoy the almost exclusive status of the region’s ‘chief bank’. Canberra’s ‘biggest bank in town’ position “is now challenged as increasingly substantial aid from Beijing makes money more readily available from China, as well as Australia. For instance, in September 2012, Papua New Guinea obtained a $A2.8 billion loan from China to improve the country’s infrastructure, in particular to upgrade the Highlands Highway and airports. On a regional radius, China had allocated more than $600 million since 2005 in ‘soft loans’, offering long interest-free periods to nations such as Tonga, Samoa and the Cook Islands.” It also stepped up its aid to Fiji following the 2006 coup.”[[106]](#footnote-106)

Chinese investment also needs to be analyzed and understood within the ‘big picture’ of the investment activities of extra-regional actors. As noted by Jenny Hayward Jones, it is generally not easy to collect reliable data on foreign direct investment in the Pacific Islands, both because of the weaknesses of Pacific Island government collecting agencies and the unwillingness of providing figures of some investors.[[107]](#footnote-107) Nevertheless, an increasing diversity in the investment-sphere once dominated by Australia and New Zealand is emerging. New players have entered the resource, aviation and communication scenes. For instance, Digicel, an Irish telecommunications company, has aggressively stepped into the mobile phone markets of most Pacific Island states, and dramatically changed the communications arena in the region.[[108]](#footnote-108) French energy companies have invested in Fiji and Papua New Guinea as well as the French Pacific. In Papua New Guinea, the US oil and gas giant Exxon Mobil has a US$19 billion investment in an integrated liquefied natural gas development in the Southern Highlands and Western Provinces that surpasses any other private sector investment in the region.[[109]](#footnote-109)

Papua New Guinea has actually been targeted by a vast array of Asian investors, including a South Korean bio-fuel project and a Japanese cement company. Malaysian companies hold the lion’s share of the timber industry in Papua New Guinea, and also have considerable interests in the palm oil industry, real estate, media and retail.[[110]](#footnote-110) The tuna processing industry has drawn investments from companies in the Philippines, South Korea, Malaysia, Thailand and China.[[111]](#footnote-111) In Samoa, Japanese firm Yazaki is the biggest private sector employer. Malaysia’s company MBf Holdings Berhad has invested in many industries all over Melanesia.[[112]](#footnote-112) In the light of this diverse, vast and multi-faceted range of investors it is easy to understand that the participation of Chinese businesses in the competitive economic environment of the Pacific Islands region is a ‘natural’ or a ‘physiological’ phenomenon.[[113]](#footnote-113) Thus, using Chinese investment as an evidence of a threat to the established geo-economic order and geo-political alignment in the South Pacific appears to be an exercise in inane speculation. It would be difficult to prove that - as PRC Ambassador to Fiji Han Zhiqiang stated in May 2011, addressing the University of South Pacific in Suva - that Sino-Pacific cooperation and investment have *not* resulted in “plenty of substantial outcomes and benefits”[[114]](#footnote-114) for the people in the region.

***5. Diplomatic and Military Ties***

The PRC has opened embassies in most of the Pacific Island states with which Beijing entertains diplomatic relations. Chinese diplomats, as diplomats are expected to do, work to further their country’s national interest and win the Pacific Island governments support and sympathy for China and its foreign policy. Diplomats will be diplomats, they are brokers of influence and access. However, it does not appear that China and it representatives are seeking to gain or deploy hard power in the Pacific Islands.[[115]](#footnote-115) An examination of the military dimension of the PRC’s engagement with the region substantiates this impression. Two Chinese naval vessels (the training vessel Zhenghe and the frigate, Mian Yang) paid a goodwill visit to the region in 2010, stopping in Tonga, Vanuatu, and Papua New Guinea before heading to Australia and New Zealand.[[116]](#footnote-116) “While this may signal longer-term military interests in the region, rumours about China setting up military bases in island states have not come to fruition.”[[117]](#footnote-117) Only four Pacific Island countries have military forces. The Republic of Fiji Military Forces has a total manpower of 3,500 active soldiers and 6,000 reservists. The Papua New Guinea Defense Force (PNGDF) numbers 4,400. Tonga Defense Services counts approximately five-hundred troops. Vanuatu has a small para-military Police Field Force of around three-hundred.[[118]](#footnote-118) All these states recognize China. Senior People’s Liberation Army officers have paid visits to their Pacific Island counterparts, and Beijing’s assistance has come in the form of military uniforms, vehicles and other non-lethal equipment, and - more recently - training in China.[[119]](#footnote-119) “This pales in comparison to the A$53 million Australia spends on defence cooperation with Pacific Islands and the A$130 million spent on operations securing the neighbourhood.”[[120]](#footnote-120) Also, while the ‘China threat’ ghost has been evoked with regards to Beijing’s ties with the military government in Fiji, the nature of the military support it has provided to Suva is analogous to that given to Papua New Guinea and Tonga: of little or null strategic significance.[[121]](#footnote-121) Even claims that the PRC intends to establish a strategic beachhead in Fiji on the grounds that Suva is a perennial base for China’s space and satellite tracking ships known as the *Yuan Wang* (English: Long View) class are, frankly, preposterous.[[122]](#footnote-122)

As a matter of fact, China’s military ties and interests in the region are negligible if compared to those of the ‘Western guardians’. Australia maintains its role of key security partner for many Pacific Island states and remains committed as the security provider for the South Pacific, which features as one of four key strategic interests in Canberra’s 2013 Defence White Paper. This document also states that Australia is determined to implement the Pacific Maritime Security Program (replacing the Pacific Patrol Boat Program) to assist Pacific Island countries manage their exclusive economic zones.[[123]](#footnote-123) The Australian Defence Force is responsible for a A$21 million Defence Cooperation Program with Papua New Guinea, coordinating training, exercises, technical advice and infrastructure upgrades.[[124]](#footnote-124) In addition, the A$31 million Australian Defence Cooperation Program delivers assistance to defence and police forces in the Pacific Islands (except Fiji) through advisorship, capability and infrastructure building, and support for participation in joint-exercises.[[125]](#footnote-125)

The United States’ principal interests are situated in the northern Pacific. “The state of Hawaii is headquarters to the United States military presence in the region known collectively as the U.S. Pacific Command. The United States maintains three flag territories, American Samoa, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, and Guam, and has Compacts of Free Association with the Federated States of Micronesia, Palau and the Republic of the Marshall Islands.”[[126]](#footnote-126) Washington thus relies on its Australian ally to protect and secure their broadly mutual strategic interests. New Zealand’s influence irradiates in Polynesia and is exerted in coordination with Australia. In security terms, Wellington provides for the defence of the Cook Islands, Niue and Tokelau.[[127]](#footnote-127) France’s territorial interests in New Caledonia, French Polynesia, and Wallis and Futuna make Paris a regional security stakeholder. France’s military, based in New Caledonia, guards and securitizes the French Pacific. France has also established a sound and productive cooperation with Australia and New Zealand on defence, disaster relief and regional maritime surveillance.[[128]](#footnote-128) In sum, geo-strategically China’s activities do not even scratch the overwhelming superiority of the Western militaries in the Pacific Islands region; those Island states which have defence forces appreciate Chinese military assistance, but have no intention of ‘defecting to the dark side of the Force’; and China has long discovered that sending diplomats is generally much more effective (and far less expensive) than sending warships.[[129]](#footnote-129) The inescapable reality is that the Pacific Island states*’* “paramount strategic and security relationships are with Australia and the United States.”[[130]](#footnote-130) Indeed, those analysts announcing a coming Melian dilemma under China’s shadow in the South Pacific[[131]](#footnote-131) are “reminiscent of a doomsday website searching for signs of the impending rapture.”[[132]](#footnote-132) Actually, it may be that, as Upton Sinclair pointed out, “it is difficult to get a man to understand something when his salary depends upon his not understanding it.”[[133]](#footnote-133)

***6. Cross-Strait Dynamics: ‘Scary’ No More***

China’s interests in the Pacific Islands prior to 2008 were driven largely by its competition with Taiwan for diplomatic recognition. In the early 2000s Beijing and Taipei competed fiercely for the allegiance of various Pacific Island states. That era ended when Taiwanese President Ma Ying-jeou proposed a diplomatic truce in 2008. This saw both Taiwan and China promise they would no longer seek to persuade states that already recognized the other to switch their recognition.[[134]](#footnote-134) As said above, since then China’s increasing presence in the Pacific has been characterized by expanding trade, investment and aid ties with the region, driven by a diverse range of Chinese economic actors. For its part, the PRC has been careful to say it is not in the Pacific Islands to compete with anyone. The then Chinese Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs Cui Tiankai told journalists at the Pacific Islands Forum in Rarotonga in 2012 that: “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.”[[135]](#footnote-135) On Taiwan’s part, the Ma administration maintains that the ‘diplomatic truce’ with Beijing has “stabilized” Taiwan’s ties with the six Pacific allies and because the bilateral approach is “more sincere” for maintaining official relations and deepening cooperation.[[136]](#footnote-136)

Over the last decade, China’s view and perception of its place in the world arena, and its capacity to act accordingly, have changed: while the South Pacific might be (still) geopolitically marginal - but of prime relevance for Taiwan’s international stand - as a state with global vision and ambitions, the PRC needs to be a protagonist in every regional theatre. Actually, both Beijing and Taipei have a set of interests in the Pacific Islands that are separate from their now-quiescent rivalry and have cultivated a versatile influence with the Pacific Islands. For example, in China’s case, the links with the island states provide Beijing with a measure of international support on a range of issues.[[137]](#footnote-137) For Taiwan, its involvement in the region is also a means to advertise itself as a humanitarian power.[[138]](#footnote-138) In addition, in the South Pacific, there are substantial resources of interest to both China and Taiwan (for instance, many island states have large fishing zones and promising seabed minerals deposits).[[139]](#footnote-139) In the light of these factors, it is foreseeable that the two Asian powers will continue to be important actors in the Southern Seas well into the next decade, regardless of the resilience of the diplomatic truce.

Actually, on the grounds of the dramatic improvement of Cross-Strait relations, it can be argued that viewing China and Taiwan’s growing role in the Pacific only from the perspective of geo-political and diplomatic competition is not only myopic, it is counter-productive. Placing Beijing and Taipei’s activities into an obsolete analytical framework risks obscuring the bigger and potentially more transformative impacts - both positive and negative - of their commercial and aid activities, and future interaction, in the region.[[140]](#footnote-140) The region’s established powers need to pursue a more sophisticated understanding of the real drivers of China’s recent activism in and Taiwan’s evolving approach to the Pacific Islands in order to avoid counter-productive policy and assist the Pacific Island countries to maximize the potential economic and development gains. In particular, the Pacific Islands region could become the testing ground for Cross-Strait coordination, cooperation, and confidence-building initiatives which, after being consolidated, could be implemented also in different regions and synergistically influence the overall development of relations between the two “Pacific dragons”.

Scholars, policy makers, diplomacy practitioners, analysts and media professionals need to develop a better understanding of the evolving role-sets of Beijing and Taipei in the South Pacific, and consistently and effectively adapt to them. Some already have. For example, Joanne Wallis has suggested that the United States and its allies could engage with China in a ‘concert of powers’ in the South Pacific in ways that would benefit broader Asia-Pacific stability and security.[[141]](#footnote-141)As for Taiwan,until recently Western actors used tofinger-point Taipei as a “Pacific troublemaker” or an element of geopolitical complication, instead of regarding it as a resource for regional development and engagement with China. Anyway, such a derogative point of view is being gradually abandoned by several Pacific analysts.[[142]](#footnote-142)

Actually, the geo-strategic competition hypothesis is misleading and based on assumptions rather than solid evidence. Ultimately, one can only focus on what China and Taiwan are actually doing in the region today. When looked at from this perspective, the records provide, at best, a weak case for the argument that China has some grand geostrategic design or that Taiwan is an inconvenient presence. The myopia of this ‘assuming rather than demonstrating’ attitude highlights the need for anew fresh approach to the investigation of regional synergiesincluding China and Taiwan. Such an approach on the one hand should emphasize China’s contribution to regional development and stability, and point to ways in which the other regional stakeholders should cooperate with China in areas that support Pacific Island priorities rather than building any new security or diplomatic arrangements designed to compete with it.[[143]](#footnote-143) On the other hand, the new perspective should elucidate Taiwan’s positive role in the South Pacific as the cross-Strait relationship enters a new era under the second Ma administration. Taiwan is now in a position to maximize its soft power in the Pacific Islands, which may be the only strategy available to protect its long-term interests in the region.[[144]](#footnote-144) This strategy could also bestow on Taiwan the status of significant, responsible and constructive player with the potential for influencing China’s regional policies thanks to Taipei’s special understanding of Beijing.[[145]](#footnote-145) The Pacific Islands now offer Beijing and Taipei the opportunity to experiment with confidence-building measures, test cooperation models, and develop synergies on a relatively small and low-risk scale. For this reason, the region could become a laboratory for cross-Strait initiatives and patterns which in the future could be implemented in other regions and deeply influence the overall development of relations between the two sides. Incremental synergies between China and Taiwan in the Pacific Islands Region would assist its stability and development, further the socialization of the two Asian stakeholders into the regional system, and benefit the overall cross-Strait relations.

***Conclusion***

On a global scale, China’s growing economic power is fuelling Beijing’s buoyant political influence and diplomatic clout, which challenge the privileged status and erode the comfort zones of established powers. The Pacific Islands region is no exception. China’s expanding presence there has given rise to negative and often unsubstantiated representations in Western accounts. Constructions of the PRC’s role in the Island countries tell us much about the attitude of the Western stakeholders towards China, the region and their own role. China’s role in the Pacific Islands has been fabricated using multiple themes and memes aimed at creating an ‘ontology of otherness’. According to this narrative “in some cases, China and the homogenized Chinese people are represented as operating in an alien moral universe.”[[146]](#footnote-146) Unrestrained by the same moral bounds as the Western countries, China is finger-pointed both as the source of many problems marring the Pacific Island nations and an obstacle to their solution. Such critiques may be rooted in reality in some instances, but the systematic description of China as a negative force is not only misleading, but also intellectually dishonest. China’s rise poses a multi-faceted challenge to the Pacific and especially to “heavily invested stakeholders like Australia and New Zealand, whose concerns are understandable.”[[147]](#footnote-147) Ironically, the Chinese big fish has the potential to capsize the South Pacific canoe *only if* the long-standing regional partners will not devise and implement a broad strategy to engage with the Asian power and favour its integration into the Pacific Island system. Many misconceptions of China as a threatening other are always intrinsically linked to how China analysts and media professionals in the West see their countries - “as representatives of the indispensable, security-conscious nation, for example.”[[148]](#footnote-148) As such, these narrative strains are not value-free, objective illustrations of an independent, pre-existing Chinese reality out there, but actually a repertory of normative and connotative discourses and practices legitimizing the status quo and aimed at turning the ‘China threat’ into social reality. In other words, such a regime of representation is self-fulfilling in purpose, and intrinsic to the problem it claims to simply describe. Very opportunely, after denouncing the ambivalent China epistemology and perceptions in Western societies and academia, David M. Lampton, former president of the National Committee on United States-China Relations, declared that “it is time to step back and look at where China is today, where it might be going, and what consequences that direction will hold for the rest of the world.”[[149]](#footnote-149) Yes, it is time. Interestingly, in 1972 Gough Whitlam led the Australian Labour Party to victory with the election slogan ‘It’s Time’, and became Prime Minister. The first Australian Prime Minister to visit China.

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