

14. China's involvement in maritime security cooperation in and with the Pacific Islands

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- China has intensified its naval, economic, and diplomatic presence in the Pacific which is disrupting traditional regional geostrategic dynamics.
- China's strategic narrative of 'Building a Maritime Community with a Shared Future', projected through the Belt and Road Initiative, presents an emerging vision that potentially threatens the legal order established by UNCLOS.

Since President Xi Jinping's 2014 visit to Fiji, China has increased its efforts to enhance its role and relationships in the Pacific Islands region. This has involved aid, infrastructure lending through its **Belt and Road Initiative**, and increasingly, security assistance, including in the maritime domain.

China's interest in the region is occurring in the context of broader strategic competition with the United States (US) and its allies and partners. China's interest also has a strategic edge, with the region's island chains – particularly those in the north – seen as crucial to China's defence.⁴³⁴ China's efforts to pursue its strategic interests were signalled by its unsuccessful September 2019 efforts to lease Tulagi Island, home to a former Japanese naval base, in Solomon Islands, and by its May 2021 offer to fund the upgrade of an airstrip on Kanton in Kiribati, a remote coral atoll located near Hawai'i that hosted military aircraft during World War II. These moves, combined with the April 2022 security agreement between Solomon Islands and China,⁴³⁵ have generated strategic anxiety amongst

the region's metropolitan powers, as well as several Pacific Island countries.

These strategic anxieties have been exacerbated by advances in the capability of the **Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN)** and the development of what the US describes as the '**People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia (PAFMM)**', a fleet of armed fishing vessels said to be controlled by the People's Liberation Army.⁴³⁶ Against this background, the Pacific Islands region is a significant site for geostrategic manoeuvring in the maritime domain to control, constrain, and deter China.⁴³⁷

Several Pacific Island countries are also concerned about China's apparent willingness to ignore and sidestep the **United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)**, which is critical to the protection and assertion of their maritime rights and security.⁴³⁸ China has declined to recognise the advisory competence of the International Tribunal on the Law of the Sea on issues critical to Pacific Island countries: climate change, and illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing. It also refused to participate in the South China Sea Arbitration and rejected the tribunal's ruling on its and the Philippines' maritime entitlements.⁴³⁹ China has since engaged in increasingly provocative behaviour against the Philippines over competing territorial claims in the South China Sea at the Second Thomas Shoal and the Spratly Islands.⁴⁴⁰ These actions risk undermining the legitimacy and effectiveness of UNCLOS.

China's most significant effort to sidestep the international maritime order is the '**Building a Maritime Community with a Shared Future**' (MCSF) initiative that President Xi Jinping launched at the 70th anniversary of the PLAN in 2019.⁴⁴¹ The MCSF builds on the 'community of shared future for mankind' that President Xi proposed in 2017, which 'represents China's grand vision of global governance and the way the world will develop in the future'.⁴⁴² Therefore, the MCSF purports to promote maritime peace, security, environmental protection, and prosperity. At a rhetorical level, the MCSF appears to echo many of the principles advocated by Pacific Island countries, as it emphasizes China's historical and cultural ties to the ocean, highlighting the importance of preserving these connections for future generations.⁴⁴³ Indeed, when launching the MCSF, President Xi described the connecting role of the ocean – a theme emphasised by the **Blue Pacific concept** – when he commented that: 'The blue planet that humans inhabit is not divided into islands by the oceans, but is connected by the oceans to form a community with a shared future, where people of all countries share weal and woe'.⁴⁴⁴ Some Pacific Island countries may recognise mutual interests with the MCSF, including cultural alignment with China's vision for harmonised human relations with the ocean.⁴⁴⁵

The MCSF has been interpreted by some Chinese scholars as a benign discourse that provides 'a future vision of harmonious coexistence between humans and the oceans for the benefit of the



whole world'.⁴⁴⁶ However, other Chinese scholars have argued that the MCSF represents a strategic narrative in which China is 'leading the restructuring of the international maritime order'.⁴⁴⁷ They argue that the MCSF may emerge as a competing sphere of authority in global ocean governance⁴⁴⁸ and undermine the maritime legal order enshrined under UNCLOS.⁴⁴⁹ Indeed, comments by China's Special Envoy for Pacific Island Countries Affairs Qian Bo that China will support the Pacific Islands Forum's **2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent** and cooperate with Pacific Island countries 'within the framework of the BRI',⁴⁵⁰ suggests that China may be seeking to shape the Pacific regional order to advance its priorities.

In this regard, Chinese scholars have argued that China's Belt and Road initiative⁴⁵¹ 'facilitates the proliferation and acceptance of the MCSF within the international community'.⁴⁵² This further suggests that China is seeking to influence the international maritime order to suit its interests. Notably, China has declined to sign-up to the Pacific Islands Forum's 2009 **Cairns Compact on Strengthening Development Coordination in the Pacific** which seeks to provide a coordinating mechanism for donors in the region. The Cairns Compact is aligned with the international 2005 *Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness* and the 2008 *Accra Agenda for Action*, both of which are already endorsed by China.

China's use of its Belt and Road Initiative lending to advance its interests

exemplifies its efforts to deploy a full suite of 'maritime geo-economic' tools of statecraft.⁴⁵³ Consequently, China has risen in donor rankings as a significant lender, donor, and development and business partner.⁴⁵⁴ China has also intensified its diplomatic efforts, including as part of its ongoing diplomatic allegiance tussle with Taiwan.⁴⁵⁵ While it has had some success at the bilateral level, including the diplomatic switches to China by Kiribati and Solomon Islands in 2019 and by Nauru in 2024, it has had limited success in its efforts to engage at a regional level. In 2022, China failed to obtain a five-year regional security and development deal. The proposed deal did, however, reveal an ambitious agenda for more substantive influence in the region.⁴⁵⁶ At the time the Pacific Islands Forum Secretary General Henry Puna had to remind China to be 'respectful of our shared values, built on joint collaboration and partnership, works with and through our regional mechanisms and progresses mutually agreed priorities'.⁴⁵⁷

The impression that China was seeking to bypass existing regional mechanisms has been enhanced by the MCSF's focus on establishing international cooperative mechanisms for effective maritime crisis management.⁴⁵⁸ In the Pacific this is manifest as **China-Pacific Island Countries Disaster Management Cooperation Mechanism** and the **China-Pacific Island Countries Center for Disaster Risk Reduction and Cooperation**.⁴⁵⁹ These mechanisms align with China's MCSF goals for 'the innovation and refinement of global

maritime governance rules ... [and] ... developing governance mechanisms for emerging maritime domains',⁴⁶⁰ but have been developed outside the Pacific regional security architecture. Indeed, these disaster resilience mechanisms duplicate efforts under the Pacific Community's **Climate Change and Environmental Sustainability Programme** and interfere with the Pacific Islands Forum's commitment to establishing their own **Pacific Resilience Facility (PRF)**,⁴⁶¹ even though China is a founding donor to the Pacific PRF.⁴⁶²

Concerned about the efforts of China and other partner countries to try to work around existing regional mechanisms, particularly the Pacific Islands Forum, Pacific Island countries are seeking to update the rules of engagement for **Forum Dialogue Partners**, including explicitly requiring dialogue partners to jointly plan and implement programs through established regional mechanisms.⁴⁶³ This highlights how China could contribute more effectively to Pacific maritime security cooperation by *consistently* supporting the existing regional architecture and values. This approach would accord with upholding a Pacific-led regional security architecture guided by the Blue Pacific concept that preserves the integrity of UNCLOS.