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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Pacific Islands and Chinese power as presence, influence, and interference

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Abstract
Dominant debates about China's growing presence in the Pacific Islands – through infrastructure, aid, trade, and investment – suggest that Chinese material power directly translates to influence and effective interference in Pacific states' domestic and foreign affairs. These perspectives fail to clarify the causal link between Chinese economic statecraft and Pacific governments' alignment with Beijing's interests. They also deny Pacific people agency, overlooking how power relations are mediated by Pacific state and non-state actors operating across complex political and socio-economic structures. We challenge such rationalist conceptualisations of Chinese power by developing a constructivist taxonomy of power as presence (dormant capability), influence (socialisation), and interference (incentives), and applying it to the Melanesian subregion. We argue that Chinese power is not merely material, causal, and unidirectional. Chinese power can also (re)shape the identities and interests of Pacific elites and publics in a constitutive manner, potentially aligning their ideas about substantive norms, rules, and practices guiding their foreign relations with Chinese 'core interests' and perspectives on regional and global politics.

Keywords: China; constructivism; influence; interference; Pacific Islands; power

In July 2022, the Australian current affairs television programme *60 Minutes* aired a story claiming that Chinese economic activities in the Pacific endangered Australia's security.[1] The programme warned that Solomon Islands' deals with China (including a security agreement in April 2022) meant that the 'once inconceivable idea of a Chinese military base being built right on our [Australia's] doorstep is now a reality'. It further argued that Beijing engaged in 'buying influence in the Pacific' through infrastructure investments. Defence analyst Alan Dupont claimed that Beijing aimed to make 'the whole Pacific region … dependent on China', transforming its 'presence and relationship' with the Pacific into 'military capability', such as by making roads, harbours, or airfields 'militarily capable'.

A few weeks later, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's *Four Corners* programme outlined what it described as China's aggressive pursuit of economic opportunities across Solomon Islands to boost its strategic interests.[2] It noted the state-owned China Forestry Group Corporation's interest in purchasing a hardwood forestry plantation (partly owned by Australian and Taiwanese

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[1]Tom Steinfort, 'Too close to home', *60 Minutes* (3 July 2022), available at: {https://9now.nine.com.au/60-minutes/too-close-to-home/14f6a7a2-5655-4dc1-95a3-3b6e149188f5}.

[2]Angus Grigg, 'Pacific capture: How Chinese money is buying Solomon Islands', *Four Corners* (4 August 2022), available at: {https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-08-01/pacific-capture:-how-chinese-money-is-buying-the/13998414}.

shareholders) on the island of Kolombangara, including a deep-water port and a Second World War airstrip. It quoted Silas Tausinga, a Solomon Islands member of parliament (MP), who expressed no doubt that China aspired to house military assets in his country and said that 'Australia should be [absolutely] worried about it'. *Four Corners* also presented evidence of a Chinese 'stimulus package' that then prime minister Manasseh Sogavare reportedly used to maintain power by dispersing funds to loyal MPs. Interviewed by *Four Corners*, academic Anna Powles argued that 'China's commercial facilities could be used in the future to house military assets'. Head of Transparency International in Solomon Islands (and former cabinet secretary) Ruth Liloqula assumed that 'China is remotely controlling the government and Solomon Islands affairs'.[3] Having refused to speak to *Four Corners*, the Sogavare government summoned the Australian High Commissioner over the report.

These are two examples of the flood of media reports that have appeared in the Australian public sphere with warnings about China's activities in the Pacific Islands region over the last five years.[4] Such reports gained pace following a 2018 *60 Minutes* programme which alerted the Australian public to 'China's "soft invasion" of the Pacific', exemplified by the China-built Luganville wharf in Vanuatu, which it claimed could be converted to a military base if Vanuatu could not service its debt to China.[5] A year later, *60 Minutes* described Kiribati and Solomon Islands' diplomatic recognition of China as the outcome of Beijing's 'dollar diplomacy' and part of Beijing's 'Pacific masterplan' to 'dominate the region' by securing access to key economic and military assets.[6]

While sensationalist, media reports about the People's Republic of China's (PRC) activities in the Pacific Islands shaped public knowledge in Australia about the objectives and methods of China's geostrategy towards the region and could not be ignored by the Australian government, and other governments with interests in the region, including the United States (US). For example, responding to the 2018 *60 Minutes* programme, then Australian prime minister Malcolm Turnbull declared 'great concern [about] the establishment of any foreign military bases in those Pacific Island countries and neighbours of ours'.[7] In late 2018, the Australian government announced a policy 'step-up' to improve its relationships and increase its investments – particularly in infrastructure and security – in the Pacific Islands.[8] Thereafter, Canberra's attention has remained focused on the region, and the Solomon Islands–China security agreement played a role in Australia's 2022 federal election; the opposition Australian Labor Party (which won the election) described it as 'Australia's biggest foreign policy blunder since World War II'.[9]

Therefore, the dominant strain of debates in Australia is essentially about how China's seeming exercise of its material power in the Pacific states endangers Australia's geostrategic security.

[3]'How Chinese money is buying Solomon Islands', *Four Corners* (1 August 2022), available at: {https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZfXX0QaNLWw}; Angus Grigg, Stephanie March, and Amy Donaldson, 'Australia urged to intervene as China tries to buy a strategic Solomon Islands port', *ABC News* (1 August 2022), available at: {https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-08-01/china-trying-to-buy-solomon-islands-port-australia-urged-to-stop/101277348}.

[4]For an analysis, see Joanne Wallis, Angus Ireland, Isabel Robinson, and Alicia Turner, 'Framing China in the Pacific Islands', *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 76:5 (2022), pp. 522–45.

[5]Tom Steinfort, 'The China syndrome', *60 Minutes* (April 2018), available at: {https://9now.nine.com.au/60-minutes/the-china-syndrome/f0a866ea-9273-4d56-84ff-22466ad85bd0}.

[6]Gareth Harvey, 'China's "soft invasion" of the South Pacific pathway to greater influence', *60 Minutes* (17 November 2019), available at: {https://www.9news.com.au/national/60-minutes-china-soft-invasion-of-south-pacific/71cddbe3-9afa-4b81-bd68-05f0d944c622}.

[7]'Chinese military base in Pacific would be of "great concern", Turnbull tells Vanuatu', *ABC Pacific Beat* (10 April 2018), available at: {https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-04-10/china-military-base-in-vanuatu-report-of-concern-turnbull-says/9635742/}.

[8]Scott Morrison, 'Australia and the Pacific: A New Chapter', speech at Lavarack Barracks, Townsville (8 November 2018), available at: {https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-41938}.

[9]Stacey Eldridge, 'Penny Wong calls on Scott Morrison to take responsibility for "Australia's biggest foreign policy blunder since World War II"', *Sky News* (22 April 2022), available at: {https://www.skynews.com.au/australia-news/penny-wong-calls-on-scott-morrison-to-take-responsibility-for-australias-biggest-foreign-policy-blunder-since-world-war-ii/news-story/aad99a42dd1ea35793a662a17c2193f8}.

Collectively, contributors to that debate suggest that China's increasingly visible *presence* in the Pacific Islands through infrastructure projects, aid, trade, and investment necessarily generates *influence* for China and unavoidably translates into Beijing's *interference* in Pacific states' internal affairs and international relations.[10] The focus on Beijing's expenditure of material resources as inevitably producing effects unfavourable to the interests of Australia, the US, and their allies and partners is significant for three reasons. First, it equates power with domination (power over) and accepts causal relationships between China's material rewards and Pacific states' compliance with Beijing's interests as unproblematic. It does so even when the contributors to the debate fail to demonstrate how Chinese economic statecraft triggers changes in the behaviour or attitudes of Pacific targets.[11] Second, it assumes Pacific elites and people are 'pawns' or passive subjects of Chinese power. In so doing, it denies them agency and overlooks complex political and socio-economic structures that mediate relations between Pacific state and non-state actors and their foreign partners. Finally, the contributors to this debate consider the concepts of 'power' and 'influence' too evident to require definitions, treating both as floating signifiers that acquire different meanings in different analytical contexts.

Given the opacity of China's foreign policymaking, it is difficult to discern the PRC's 'real' objectives in the Pacific. Notwithstanding some efforts to discern China's motives in the region by, for example, surveying Chinese scholars,[12] the lack of transparency in the Chinese political system forces us to focus on what we *can* identify and analyse, namely, the geo-economic strategies and related instruments deployed by the Chinese foreign policymakers. First, Beijing undeniably pursues economic statecraft in the Pacific, seeking to advance economic interests by, for example, stimulating demand for its goods, services, and capital,[13] and its geostrategic interests, such as enforcing Taiwan's diplomatic isolation. Second, it engages in efforts to establish regional economic and security pacts[14] and multilateral mechanisms (e.g. the China–Pacific Islands Countries Disaster Management Cooperation Mechanism and the China–Pacific Islands Countries Center for Disaster Risk Reduction) that seek to sideline those involving Australia, New Zealand, and other traditional partners. Finally, as some argue, China seeks 'strategic space'[15] or 'strategic reach'[16] to counter the perceived containment policy by the United States and others in the broader Indo-Pacific. Thus, Beijing's strategies towards Pacific states should be of interest – if not concern – to Canberra and Washington.

We challenge the rationalist conceptualisation of Chinese power in the contemporary Pacific that underpins the dominant strain of the current debate in Western academia and public debates. We argue that Chinese power is not necessarily exclusively causal, reliant on material resources, and inducing strategic or tactical compliance by Pacific targets. Rather, Chinese power can also constitute Pacific targets' identities and interests by (re)shaping Pacific elites' and the broader public's

[10]Peter Connolly, 'Grand strategy: Inside China's statecraft in Melanesia', *Australian Foreign Affairs* (February 2023), pp. 42–65; Richard Herr, *Chinese Influence in the Pacific Islands* (Canberra: Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 2019); Denghua Zhang, 'China's diplomacy in the Pacific: Interests, means and implications', *Security Challenges*, 13:2 (2017), pp. 32–53; Denghua Zhang, 'China in the Pacific and traditional powers' New Pacific policies', *Security Challenges*, 16:1 (2020), pp. 78–93.

[11]Connolly, 'Grand strategy', p. 65. Connolly's study identifies cases of unsuccessful Chinese influence attempts, including 14 'separate potential attempts by the PRC to develop "dual-use facilitates" in Melanesia between 2014–2022'. Notably, these were attempts, rather than successes, and indeed, after surveying a range of Chinese activities, the author admits that 'none of these efforts demonstrate influence, but they are clearly an attempt to achieve it'.

[12]Denghua Zhang, 'China's motives, influence and prospects in Pacific Island countries', *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, 23:1 (2023), pp. 33–59.

[13]Lee Jones and Shahar Hameiri, *Debunking the Myth of 'Debt-Trap Diplomacy'* (London: Chatham House, 2020).

[14]Anna Powles, 'Five things we learned about China's ambitions for the Pacific from the leaked deal', *The Guardian* (26 May 2022).

[15]Peter Connolly, 'China's quest for strategic space in the Pacific Islands', *National Bureau of Asian Research* (16 January 2024), available at: {https://strategicspace.nbr.org/chinas-quest-for-strategic-space-in-the-pacific-islands/}.

[16]Joanne Wallis and Maima Koro, 'Amplifying narratives about the "China threat" in the Pacific may help China achieve its broader aims', *The Conversation* (27 May 2022), available at: {https://theconversation.com/amplifying-narratives-about-the-china-threat-in-the-pacific-may-help-china-achieve-its-broader-aims-183917}.

ideas about substantive norms and practices, guiding appropriate action, and socialising them with the rules and norms of the 'China game'.

We begin by critiquing competing perspectives about China's role in the Pacific Islands. We then outline our constructivist taxonomy of power as composed of three modes: power as dormant capability (presence), power as socialisation (influence), and power as incentives (interference). Thereafter, we suggest how our conceptual framework facilitates a more nuanced understanding of how foreign powers (including China) affect Pacific states. We argue that dominant debates over-estimate China's power in the region. To be effective, the Chinese authorities cannot solely rely on power resources that are material, unidirectional, and focused on state elites. Instead, they must navigate complex socio-political authority structures, coordinate the activities of diverse state and non-state agents, and address the unintended consequences of such activities. They must also compete with foreign power-actors seeking engagement with their Pacific partners. At the same time, we argue that the existing debates about China in the Pacific underestimate the potentially long-term, constitutive consequences of the Chinese exercise of power. By focusing primarily on the deployment of material power resources, they overlook the potential for China's efforts, through influence and interference, to mould the identities and interests of Pacific elites and the broader public, as well as the norms and values guiding appropriate relations with China and China's adversaries.

China in the Pacific: Competing perspectives

Although never straightforward, Pacific geopolitics have become more 'crowded and complex' over the past two decades.[17] 'Traditional' powers – namely, Australia, the US, New Zealand, France, Japan, and the United Kingdom (UK) – perceive that the growing presence of 'new' actors, particularly China but also India, Indonesia, and Taiwan, undermines their interests. Recent concerns about 'grey zone' security challenges – 'activities designed to coerce countries in ways that seek to avoid military conflict', including 'exploiting influence, interference operations, and the coercive use of trade and economic levers'[18] – further enhance 'traditional' powers' apprehension about 'new' actors' geostrategic impact in the region.

The 'new' actor that has received the most attention is China, which slowly built an official presence in the region from the 1970s, at first in its competition with Taiwan for diplomatic recognition. Promises of economic assistance – via aid, trade, and investment – helped Beijing expand its diplomatic space in the Pacific and grow its economic footprint, with nine Pacific states joining China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). By mid-2024, after Solomon Islands (2019), Kiribati (2019), and Nauru (2024) (re-)established official relations with the PRC, the number of Pacific states loyal to Taiwan had shrunk to three.

Chinese loans to Pacific states, accompanied by a sharp rise in Chinese-funded and -built infrastructure projects, have led to claims that China has attempted 'debt-trap diplomacy'. This idea holds that Beijing uses commercial loans to secure access to critical resources or military facilities (such as ports or airstrips) if debtor states cannot service their loans.[19] Given questions regarding the sustainability of much of the debt assumed by Pacific states, some commentators have expressed concerns about their susceptibility to Chinese pressure.[20] While concerns about 'debt traps' are new in the Pacific context, a 'China threat' perspective is older. Analysts have long argued that

[17] Pacific Islands Forum, Boe Declaration on Regional Security, 5 September 2018; Joanne Wallis, *Crowded and Complex: The Changing Geopolitics of the South Pacific* (Canberra: Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 2017).

[18] Department of Defence, '2020 Defence Strategic Update' (2020), p. 12.

[19] Sam Parker and Gabrielle Chefitz, 'Debtbook Diplomacy: China's Strategic Leveraging of Its Newfound Economic Influence', Belfer Center, Harvard Kennedy School (2018), available at: {https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/debtbook-diplomacy}.

[20] Roland Rajah, Alexandre Dayant, and Jonathan Pryke, *Ocean of Debt? Belt and Road and Debt Diplomacy in the Pacific* (Sydney: Lowy Institute, 2019).

Beijing tries to encourage Pacific states to shift allegiance from traditional partners to China[21] to 'counterattack the perceived US containment of China by opening up a "new battlefield" for political influence and economic competition in the South Pacific' and to 'ensure China's rise at the systemic (global) level'.[22]

Chinese state-owned enterprises' activities in the region, such as logging projects, fisheries, and the Ramu and Frieda River mines in Papua New Guinea (PNG), seemingly support claims that Chinese 'influence and interference' is 'quite brazen', while the BRI is characterised as a tool of China's 'grand strategy'.[23] According to the Australian media and commentary,[24] China's 'no strings' and 'soft' loans,[25] 'debt-trap diplomacy',[26] private sector investment,[27] growing diplomatic footprint, and training and scholarships[28] have grown its 'influence'.[29] More recent claims focus on Chinese 'hacking and foreign interference'[30] in the region's information domain,[31] providing Beijing with access to monitoring and surveillance.[32] These claims frequently characterise Pacific states as 'intimidated',[33] geopolitical 'football[s]',[34] 'domino[es] to fall',[35] or 'credit colonies'.[36]

Not all analysts agree with the proponents of the 'China threat'. Some do not see any 'well-coordinated grand strategy behind China's presence'.[37] They argue that China's presence has grown

[21]Ron Crocombe, *Asia in the Pacific Islands: Replacing the West* (Suva: University of the South Pacific, 2007); Graeme Dobell, *China and Taiwan in the South Pacific: Diplomatic Chess versus Pacific Political Rugby* (Canberra: Australian National University, 2007); John Henderson and Benjamin Reilly, 'Dragon in paradise: China's rising star in Oceania', *The National Interest*, 72 (2003), pp. 94–104; Marc Lanteigne, 'Water dragon? China, power shifts and soft balancing in the South Pacific', *Political Science*, 61:1 (2012), pp. 21–38; Tamara Renee Shie, 'Rising Chinese influence in the South Pacific: Beijing's "island fever"', *Asian Survey,* 47:2 (2010), pp. 307–26; Susan Windybank, 'The China syndrome', *Policy*, 21:2 (2005), pp. 28–33.

[22]Yu Lei and Sophia Sui, 'China–Pacific Island countries strategic partnership', *East Asia*, 39:1 (2021), pp. 81–96 (p. 99).

[23]Pete Connolly, 'Engaging China's new foreign policy in the South Pacific', *Australian Jounal of International Affairs*, 70:5 (2020), pp. 484–505.

[24]See Wallis, et al., 'Framing China in the Pacific Islands'.

[25]Greg Colton, 'Safeguarding Australia's security interests through closer Pacific ties', research report, Lowy Institute (2018); Ben Doherty, 'China's aid to Papua New Guinea threatens Australia's influence', *The Guardian* (3 July 2018).

[26]David Wroe, 'Trouble in paradise', *Sydney Morning Herald* (13 April 2018); Helen Davidson, 'Warning sounded over China's "debtbook diplomacy"', *The Guardian* (15 May 2018).

[27]Pacific Beat, 'Undersea cable deal with PNG inked amid concerns over Chinese influence in the Pacific', *ABC News* (13 November 2017), available at: {https://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-11-14/png-to-get-new-australia-funded-undersea-internet-cable/9146570}; David Wroe, 'Australia refuses to connect to undersea cable built by Chinese company', *Sydney Morning Herald* (26 July 2017).

[28]Feng Zhang, 'Should Australia worry about Chinese expansion in the South Pacific?', *The Strategist* (11 July 2016), available at: {https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/australia-worry-chinese-expansion-south-pacific/}.

[29]Peter Jennings, 'Australia needs to limit its exposure to corruptive influences', *The Australian* (3 September 2016); Daniel Flitton, 'Voiceless in the South Pacific', *Sydney Morning Herald* (28 August 2014).

[30]Anthony Galloway, 'Pacific Islands Forum on brink of collapse over leadership dispute', *Sydney Morning Herald* (8 February 2021).

[31]Patrick Dupont, 'The United States' Indo-Pacific strategy and a revisionist China: Partnering with small and middle powers in the Pacific Islands region', *Issues & Insights*, 21:2 (2021), pp. 1–40; Michael Shoebridge, 'Ardern–Morrison meeting about the Pacific, not China policy shenanigans', *The Strategist* (29 May 2021), available at: {https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/ardern-morrison-meeting-about-the-pacific-not-china-policy-shenanigans/}.

[32]Tristan Kenderdine, 'Putting the Pacific on China's radar', *East–West Center* (4 January 2017), available at: {https://www.eastwestcenter.org/publications/putting-the-pacific-chinas-radar}; Ethan Meick, Michelle Ker, and Han May Chan, *China's Engagement in the Pacific Islands: Implications for the United States* (Washington, DC: U.S.–China Economic and Security Review Commission, 2018).

[33]Phillip Coorey, 'Pax Americana in the Pacific', *Sydney Morning Herald* (18 November 2011).

[34]John Garnaut, 'China cosies up to Fiji for influence', *Sydney Morning Herald* (26 September 2012).

[35]Glenda Korporaal, 'Solomons the latest domino to fall in China's Taiwan plan', *The Australian* (18 September 2019).

[36]Patrick Dupont, 'China's Pacific challenge: A chain of credit colonies', *The Australian* (4 September 2018).

[37]Chengxin Pan, Matthew Clarke, and Sophie Loy-Wilson, 'Local agency and complex power shifts in the era of Belt and Road: Perceptions of Chinese aid in the South Pacific', *Journal of Contemporary China*, 28:117 (2019), pp. 385–99; Jian Yang, 'China in the South Pacific: Hegemon on the horizon?', *The Pacific Review*, 22:2 (2009), pp. 139–58.

'more by accident than design'[38] and urge against exaggerating the 'China threat'.[39] For others, China's Pacific strategy merely mirrors other developing countries' policies[40] or is driven by economic interests,[41] diplomatic competition with Taiwan, support in international fora, and a desire to build its image as 'a benign, responsible global power'.[42] Steven Ratuva suggests that 'China threat' narratives represent 'Sinophobia', i.e. the 'racialized construction of Chinese threat' in Australia and other traditional powers.[43] For others, 'China threat' and strategic competition narratives constitute self-fulfilling prophecies, 'contribut[ing] to [their] materialization in practice'.[44]

Some analysts debunk 'myths' regarding the threat China poses to the Pacific states' finances.[45] For example, the Asian Development Bank has replaced China as the region's largest lender and Chinese lending – except for Tonga[46] – comprises less than half of the total to any one Pacific state.[47] While China's aid to the Pacific increased over the last decade, it is dwarfed by Australia's contribution and has declined in real terms since 2019.[48] Furthermore, China's infrastructure finance has dropped and become more tightly targeted since 2021.[49] This reduction reflects a shift in China's domestic economy after the Covid-19 pandemic. While pre-pandemic lending reflected the policy to 'externalize industrial overcapacity and capital accumulation', the post-pandemic downturn in China's domestic economy directed Beijing's focus to risk management and minimising lending losses.[50]

Still, foreign policymakers, particularly in Australia, the US, Japan, and Europe, appear inclined to side with the 'China threat' proponents. The 2020 Australian Defence Strategic Update specified that:

> Since 2016, major powers have become more assertive in advancing their strategic preferences and seeking to exert influence, including China's active pursuit of greater influence in the

[38]Joanne Wallis, *Pacific Power? Australia's Strategy in the Pacific Islands* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2017), p. 202.

[39]Luke Fletcher and Pichamon Yeophantong, *Enter the Dragon: Australia, China, and the New Pacific Development Agenda* (Sydney: Jubilee Australia Research Centre, Caritas Australia, and the University of New South Wales, 2019); Zhou Fangyin, 'A reevaluation of China's engagement in the Pacific Islands', in Graeme Smith and Terence Wesley-Smith (eds), *The China Alternative: Changing Regional Order in the Pacific Islands* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2021), pp. 233–58; Michael O'Keefe, 'The militarisation of China in the Pacific: Stepping up to a new cold war?', *Security Challenges*, 16:1 (2020), pp. 94–112; Terence Wesley-Smith and Graeme Smith, 'Introduction: The return of great power competition', in Graeme Smith and Terence Wesley-Smith (eds), *The China Alternative: Changing Regional Order in the Pacific Islands* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2021), pp. 1–40.

[40]Yongjun Zhang, 'China and the emerging regional order in the South Pacific', *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 61:3 (2007), pp. 367–81; Terence Wesley-Smith, 'China's rise in Oceania: Issues and perspectives', *Pacific Affairs*, 86:2 (2013), pp. 351–72.

[41]Kate Hannan and Stewart Firth, 'Trading with the dragon', *Journal of Contemporary China*, 24:95 (2015), pp. 865–82; Zhang, 'China's motives, influence and prospects'.

[42]Denghua Zhang and Stephanie Lawson, 'China in Pacific regional politics', *The Round Table*, 106:2 (2017), pp. 197–206; Fletcher and Yeophantong, *Enter the Dragon*; Joel Atkinson, 'China–Taiwan diplomatic competition and the Pacific Islands', *The Pacific Review*, 23:4 (2010), pp. 407–27.

[43]Steven Ratuva, 'The politics of imagery: Understanding the historical genesis of Sinophobia in Pacific geopolitics', *East Asia*, 39 (2022), pp. 13–28 (p. 14).

[44]Chengxin Pan and Matthew Clarke, 'Narrating the South Pacific in and beyond great power politics', *East Asia*, 39 (2022), pp. 1–11 (p. 3).

[45]Jones and Hameiri, *Debunking the Myth*.

[46]Riley Duke, 'Tonga walks a tightrope on its Chinese debts', *The Interpreter* (31 January 2024), available at: {https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/tonga-walks-tightrope-its-chinese-debts}.

[47]Rohan Fox and Matthew Dornan, 'China in the Pacific: Is China engaged in "debt-trap diplomacy"?', *DevPolicy* (8 November 2018), available at: {https://devpolicy.org/is-china-engaged-in-debt-trap-diplomacy-20181108/}.

[48]Lowy Institute, 'Pacific Aid Map', available at: {https://pacificaidmap.lowyinstitute.org/graphingtool}.

[49]Alexandre Dayant, Riley Duke, Gilliane De Gorostiza, and Roland Raja, 'Lowy Institute Pacific Aid Map: 2023 Key Findings Report', Lowy Institute (2023).

[50]Shahar Hameiri and Lee Jones, 'China, international competition and the stalemate in sovereign debt restructuring: Beyond geopolitics', *International Affairs*, 100:2 (2024), pp. 691–710.

Indo-Pacific. Australia is concerned by the potential for actions, such as the establishment of military bases, which could undermine stability in the Indo-Pacific and our immediate region.[51]

In response to China's perceived Pacific challenge, Australia embarked on a policy 'step-up' in the Pacific. New Zealand made a 'Pacific reset' and has subsequently emphasised 'Pacific resilience'. The US adopted a 'Pacific Pledge' and later a 'Pacific Partnership Strategy'. Japan emphasised its 'Pacific Bond'. The UK made a 'Pacific Uplift'. France deemed the region central to its Indo-Pacific 'strategic axis'. While ostensibly concerned with developmental assistance, such policies are primarily geostrategic. For example, Australia's Pacific step-up seeks to counter China's BRI lending through an A\$4 billion Australian Infrastructure Financing Facility for the Pacific and A\$1bn to Export Finance Australia to support private sector investment. It also seeks to expand Australia's already large security footprint, including by creating the Pacific Security College to strengthen the capacity of Pacific officials and the Pacific Fusion Centre to undertake strategic assessments and support information sharing. Australia has also committed to a greater military presence, through an upgraded Pacific Maritime Security Program to assist in maritime surveillance, and a support vessel dedicated to the region to assist in humanitarian and disaster relief, maritime surveillance, and regional search and rescue. Australia signed a security treaty with Solomon Islands in 2017; security partnership memoranda of understanding with Nauru and Tuvalu in 2017; a vuvale (friendship) partnership with Fiji in 2019 and a status of forces agreement in 2022; a comprehensive strategic and economic partnership with PNG in 2020 and a security agreement in 2023; a bilateral security agreement with Vanuatu in 2022; and a security treaty, the 'Falepili Union', with Tuvalu in 2023.

In 2018, Australia and the US announced that they would cooperate in redeveloping Lombrum Naval Base on Manus Island in PNG, and, in 2019, US secretary of the interior David Bernhardt pledged US\$36.4 million in new assistance to the region (in addition to the US\$350 million that the US provided annually).[52] This announcement became known as the 'Pacific Pledge of the Indo-Pacific Strategy' and was expanded to include a doubling of US development assistance. The US also announced the Pacific Deterrence Initiative, in which Guam and Hawai'i, home to US military bases, are critical sites for US defence capability.

American interest in the region increased after the China–Solomon Islands security agreement became public,[53] with National Security Council Indo-Pacific coordinator Kurt Campbell and assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Daniel Kritenbrink travelling to Solomon Islands in April 2022. During that visit, Kritenbrink pointedly commented: 'We have respect for the Solomon Islands' sovereignty, but we also wanted to let them know that if steps were taken [by China] to establish a de facto permanent military presence, power projection capabilities or a military installation, then we would have significant concerns and we would very naturally respond to those concerns.'[54]

In 2022, Vice President Kamala Harris announced, when speaking virtually at the Pacific Islands Forum in Fiji, that the US would open embassies in Tonga and in Kiribati. The US government also released its first USAID Pacific Islands Strategic Framework and a broader whole-of-government Pacific Partnership Strategy to demonstrate its commitment to the region in 2022. After President Joe Biden hosted Pacific leaders for the first Pacific Islands Summit at the White

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[51]Department of Defence, '2020 Defence Strategic Update', p. 11.

[52]Office of the Spokesperson, 'Pacific Islands Forum: U.S. engagement in the Pacific Islands', Fact Sheet, US Department of State (17 August 2019), available at: {https://2017-2021.state.gov/pacific-islands-forum-u-s-engagement-in-the-pacific-islands/index.html}.

[53]Joanne Wallis, Emily Conroy, and Cayleigh Stock, 'The United States as a "Pacific nation": Imaginary, performance, and spatialisation', *Geopolitics* (2024), available at: {https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2024.2302421}.

[54]Phelim Kine, 'U.S. turns the screws on Solomon Islands to counter China', *Politico* (28 April 2022), available at: {https://www.politico.com/newsletters/politico-china-watcher/2022/04/28/u-s-turns-the-screws-on-solomon-islands-to-counter-china-00028449}.

House in September 2022, the Declaration on the US–Pacific Partnership further emphasised the US's intention to deepen its regional role. In May 2023, secretary of state Antony Blinken visited PNG (standing in Biden's stead after he had to cancel for domestic political reasons), and secretary of defence Lloyd J. Austin signed a defence cooperation agreement with PNG. Blinken also conveyed an invitation from Biden for Pacific leaders to return to Washington for a second US–Pacific Islands Forum Summit in September 2023, which they did. However, then Solomon Islands prime minister Manasseh Sogavare declined to attend, arguing that it was more important to return to Honiara from the US (where he had spoken at the UN General Assembly) to address 'domestic issues', as 'last year, nothing came up out of this meeting'.[55]

These developments highlight tangible policy consequences of the 'China threat' narrative. Yet the analyses of Chinese power in the Pacific that underpin that narrative either assume the concept of power (or influence) as obvious and not requiring a definition,[56] define the concept of power (e.g. soft and sharp power) uncritically,[57] or appear aware of competing conceptual approaches to power but choose not to engage with theoretical debates substantively.[58] While remaining largely disinterested in exploring what power is, students of China–Pacific states relations – including those leaning towards constructivism[59] – seemingly rely on Robert Dahl's understanding of power as 'A [having] power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do,'[60] infused with a dose of realpolitik and neoliberalism linking commercial and military strategies or referencing power transition theory. But we argue that the Dahlian (and, more generally, rationalist) perspective on power fails to capture the complex ways in which power operates. It also fails to account for Pacific agency and sociopolitical structures specific to the Pacific, which necessarily mediate Chinese (and other foreign actors') efforts to (re)shape Pacific discourses, practices, and policies.

Conceptualising power as presence, influence, and interference

The phenomenon of power is central to understanding international affairs. Yet it was only in the mid to late 20th century, echoing the three-faces-of-power debate in Political Science,[61] that International Relations (IR) scholars began analysing power systematically. Classical realist Hans Morgenthau defined it as 'man's control over the minds and actions of other men', constituted by material forces and involving coercion.[62] Kenneth Waltz's neorealist conceptualisation focused on

[55]Quoted in Nick Sas, Tim Swanston, and Chrisnrita Aumanu-Leong, 'Solomon Islands PM blasts the United States after missing Pacific leaders' summit at White House', *ABC News* (27 September 2023), available at: {https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-09-27/solomon-islands-sogavare-blasts-united-states-after-summit-snub/102908430}.

[56]Connolly, 'Grand strategy'; Graeme Dobell, 'China and Taiwan in the South Pacific: Diplomatic Chess versus Pacific Political Rugby', CSCSD Occasional Paper Number 1, Australian National University (2007); Denghua Zhang, 'China's influence and local perceptions: The case of Pacific Island countries', *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 76:5 (2022), pp. 575–95; Henryk Szadziewski, 'A search for coherence: The Belt and Road Initiative in the Pacific Islands', in Graeme Smith and Terence Wesley-Smith (eds), *The China Alternative: Changing Regional Order in the Pacific Islands* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2021), pp. 283–317; Sandra Tarte, 'Building a strategic partnership: Fiji–China relations since 2008', in Graeme Smith and Terence Wesley-Smith (eds), *The China Alternative: Changing Regional Order in the Pacific Islands* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2021), pp. 375–95; Transform Aqorau, 'Solomon Islands' foreign policy dilemma and the switch from Taiwan to China', in in Graeme Smith and Terence Wesley-Smith (eds), *The China Alternative: Changing Regional Order in the Pacific Islands* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2021), pp. 319–348; Terence Wesley-Smith, 'China's rise in Oceania: Issues and perspectives', *Pacific Affairs*, 86:2 (2013), pp. 351–72.

[57]Herr, *Chinese Influence in the Pacific Islands*.

[58]Pan, Clarke, and Loy-Wilson, 'Local agency and complex power shifts'.

[59]Pan, Clarke, and Loy-Wilson, 'Local agency and complex power shifts'.

[60]Ronald A. Dahl, 'The concept of power', *Behavioural Science*, 2:3 (1957), pp. 201–15 (pp. 202–3).

[61]Dahl, 'The concept of power'; Peter Bachrach and Morton S. Baratz, 'Two faces of power', *The American Political Science Review*, 56:4 (1962), pp. 947–52; Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View* (London: Macmillan, 1974).

[62]Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York: McGraw-Hill, [1948] 1997), p. 32.

the global distribution of primarily material power resources and capabilities.[63] In the 1970s and 1980s, institutional liberals and international political economists understood power as emerging from asymmetric interdependence and taking the form of a bargaining process; that is, the costs to A of influencing B, the opportunity cost to B for non-compliance, and the number of options available to B.[64] Post-positivist IR approaches examined diffuse forms of global power, including institutional and structural.[65] More recent efforts have sought to identify unifying frameworks to understand how power operates at systemic[66] and state levels.[67] However, as noted earlier, rationalist frameworks continue to dominate media and scholarly analyses of the Chinese exercise of power in the Pacific.

Rationalists consider power to be relational, reliant primarily on material resources and involving bargaining. Whether analysing Westphalian states as undifferentiated units or a variety of non-state agents, they assume the interests of such value-maximising actors as self-evident, constant, and exogenous. However, by treating them as calculating and self-interested, rationalists marginalise the question of identity ('relatively stable, role-specific understandings and expectations about self'[68]). Indeed, while recognising – implicitly or explicitly – ideas and norms as potentially explaining actors' preferences and behaviour,[69] they neither explicate how ideas reshape behaviour nor conceive of ideas and norms as constituting actors' identities and interests,[70] nor consider them significant enough to merit an in-depth examination.[71]

We build on conventional constructivist insights to depart from the dominant, rational-choice approaches to power in IR theorising in general, and China's exercise of power in the Pacific in particular. Constructivists starts from the premise that 'material facts alone have no meaning without understanding the social context, the shared knowledge, the practices surrounding it'.[72] They do not necessarily reject rationalist conceptualisations of power, as they concede that material capabilities have intrinsic causal effects.[73] But they argue that power explains only 'insofar as it is given meaning by interest'.[74] So power is constituted 'through the distribution of interests', which are only partly material; the 'rest is ideational: schemas and deliberations that are in turn constituted by shared ideas and culture'.[75] Constructivists consider identities central because they are 'the basis on which action can be rationalized, providing actors with a reason for being and acting'.[76] That is,

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[63]Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979).

[64]David A. Baldwin, 'Interdependence and power: A conceptual analysis', *International Organization*, 34:4 (1980), pp. 471–506; Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, *Power and Interdependence*, 4th ed. (New York: Pearson, 2011).

[65]Michael N. Barnett and Martha Finnemore, 'The politics, power, and pathologies', *International Organization*, 53:4 (1999), pp. 699–732; Robert W. Cox, *Production, Power and World Order* (Columbia University Press, 1987); Stefano Guzzini, 'Structural power: The limits of neorealist power analysis', *International Organization*, 47:3 (1993), pp. 443–78; G. John Ikenberry and Charles A. Kupchan, 'Socialization and hegemonic power', *International Organization*, 44:3 (1990), pp. 283–315.

[66]Michael Barnett and Robert Duvall, 'Power in international politics', *International Organization*, 59:1 (2005), pp. 39–75.

[67]Evelyn Goh, 'Introduction', in Evelyn Goh (ed.), *Rising China's Influence in Developing Asia* (Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 1–23.

[68]Alexander Wendt, 'Anarchy is what states make of it: The social construction of power politics', *International Organization*, 46:2 (1992), pp. 391–425 (p. 397).

[69]Baldwin, 'Interdependence and power'; Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004).

[70]André Broome, 'Constructivism in IPE', in R. Palan (ed.), *Global Political Economy: Contemporary Theories* (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 193–204.

[71]James Reilly, *Orchestration: China's Economic Statecraft across Asia and Europe* (Oxfrod: Oxford University Press, 2021).

[72]Trine Flockhart, 'Constructivism and foreign policy', in Steve Smith, Amelia Hadfield, and Timothy Dunne (eds), *Foreign Policy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 78–93 (p. 84).

[73]Thomas Risse, '"Let's argue!": Communicative action in world politics', *International Organization*, 54:1 (2000), pp. 1–39.

[74]Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 109.

[75]Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, p. 115.

[76]Christian Reus-Smit, *The Moral Purpose of the State: Culture, Social Identity, and Institutional Rationality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 29.

ideas and identities act as the basis of interests 'because an actor cannot know what it wants until it knows who it is'.[77] Interests, in turn, determine behaviour.

We adopt Barnett and Duvall's 'relational' definition of power as 'the production, in and through social relations, of effects that shape the capacities of actors to determine their circumstances and fate'.[78] However, by building upon conventional constructivism, we address Barnett and Duvall's neglect of constructivism as analytically useful to analyse power and challenge their eclectic ontological approach to power. Instead, we propose an ontologically coherent framework that considers material and discursive dimensions, differentiating between power as (a) presence (dormant capability), (b) influence (socialisation), and (c) interference (incentives).

Contrary to Ikenberry and Kupchan,[79] our taxonomy does not imply that presence, influence, and interference are sequential. In practice, these modes of power coexist, mutually reinforcing, intersecting, and reflecting off each other. Our taxonomy also does not consider a conflict of interests – whether overt or not – necessary to the exercise of power. Finally, it problematises the interaction between material and discursive power resources, leading to a more nuanced understanding of the concept. Our taxonomy is particularly relevant for analysing strategic competition in Melanesia, where much commentary either focuses on material resources or collapses influence and interference into each other. More specifically, we propose to theorise power and relations between power-actors and their targets as follows.

Presence

We theorise presence as a power-actor's physical presence in another state, involving routine diplomatic activities. As the power-actor makes no discernible attempt to modify the behaviour of any target, presence constitutes power as dormant capability.[80] It is crucial to influence and interference since, through presence, the power-actor develops familiarity with historical and cultural frameworks, political systems and institutions, and key domestic actors. This knowledge facilitates its understanding of the material and ideational contexts and the regulative and normative rules governing them, within which domestic actors compete over the collective identities and interests and determine their practices.

Influence

We conceptualise influence as referring to the power-actor's efforts to modify or (re)shape the values, attitudes, norms, and preferences of the target state or non-state actor(s) – including national and subnational state elites, public intellectuals, academics, journalists, and representatives of civil society groups – through a process of socialisation. This involves transmitting norms and 'ideals' from power-actor to target(s) *without overt coercion* through normative persuasion, social learning, argumentation, and deliberation.[81] Only in circumstances when the power-actor's ideas and norms clash directly with those of the target may socialisation appear coercive.

We hold that socialisation typically manifests via conventional and public diplomacy, including regular communication among policymakers (including 'host diplomacy'), state agencies and political parties, cultural, educational, and church exchanges, as well as posts/publications and broadcasts in traditional and social media.[82] Through socialisation, both power-actors and their

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[77] Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, p. 231; Emanuel Adler, 'Seizing the middle ground: Constructivism in world politics', *European Journal of International Relations*, 3:3 (1997), pp. 319–63.

[78] Michael Barnett and Robert Duvall, 'Power in international politics', *International Organization*, 59:1 (2005), pp. 39–75 (p. 42).

[79] Ikenberry and Kupchan, 'Socialization and hegemonic power', p. 286.

[80] Goh, 'Introduction'.

[81] Jeffrey T. Checkel, 'Why comply? Social learning and European identity change', *International Organization*, 55:3 (2001), pp. 553–88; Ikenberry and Kupchan, 'Socialization and hegemonic power'.

[82] Nicholas J. Cull, *Public Diplomacy: Lessons from the Past* (Los Angeles: Figueroa Press, 2009).

targets develop 'a common knowledge concerning both a definition of the situation and an agreement about the underlying "rules of the game"', including the norms of appropriate behaviour.[83] This is important because socially shared ideas, including norms 'or social knowledge about cause-and-effect relationships', 'constitute the identity of actors' and 'regulate their behaviour.'[84]

We argue that, for socialisation to succeed, power-targets must internalise substantive norms, beliefs, and related interests espoused by the power-actor in a constitutive, identity-shaping manner rather than strategically or expediently based on cost–benefit calculations.[85] However, exercising power via socialisation is unlikely to modify the identities and interests of *all* targets. Some may remain impervious due to their existing beliefs, values, and practices, which are, in their view, irreconcilable with those of the power-actor. Despite this, influence remains the most desirable form of power, as 'it is always easier to maintain a social order through consent than through coercion.'[86] When socialisation succeeds, the influence-seeker can also 'expend fewer [material] resources to secure acquiescence because there is a more fundamental correspondence of values and interests.'[87]

Power as socialisation operates regardless of whether it is 'conducted in an open, lawful and transparent manner'.[88] While targeting entire societies, its immediate objective is often local elites, who possess the authority and access to domestic institutional structures that foreign power-actors usually lack. Once co-opted, the power-actor's values, norms, and beliefs become naturalised background knowledge which local elites unconsciously incorporate in policymaking and debates. Thus, by tapping into the local social structuring of deference and legitimacy, the power-actor seeks to suppress resistance to socialisation. However, an analysis of influence cannot be limited to the effects on the targets alone, because socialisation is intersubjective and may also have a normative impact on the power-actor.

Interference

Interference refers to practices beyond 'routine diplomatic influence'.[89] It relies on manipulating material and non-material incentives to induce a short- or long-term change in the behaviour of the target(s) on specific issues, often related to governmental policymaking. This may involve positive material inducements (such as aid, trade, market access, loans, investment, technology transfers, scholarships, and bribes or promises thereof) and negative ones (i.e. a withdrawal of positive material incentives or threats thereof). The non-material inducements include, for example, public praise for the target's domestic and international strategies that enhance its reputation, the 'upgrading' of diplomatic relations from 'normal' to a 'strategic partnership' and – further up – a 'comprehensive strategic partnership', as well as bestowing upon key elites honorary titles (such as friendship ambassadorships) or doctorates, which targeted individuals find flattering.

Inducements – whether material or non-material – possess no intrinsic, 'objective' value because 'people act toward objects … on the basis of the meaning that the objects have for them';[90] their value is formed intersubjectively as it must comprise the significance given by other actors.[91] Thus,

[83] Risse, "'Let's argue', p. 2.

[84] Risse, "'Let's argue', p. 2.

[85] Checkel, 'Why comply?'.

[86] Barnett and Duvall, 'Power in international politics', p. 53.

[87] Ikenberry and Kupchan, 'Socialization and hegemonic power', p. 286.

[88] Attorney-General's Department, 'What Is the Difference between "Foreign Influence" and "Foreign Interference"?', Factsheet 2 (28 February 2019), available at: {https://www.ag.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-03/influence-versus-interference.pdf}.

[89] Attorney-General's Department, 'What Is the Difference between "Foreign Influence" and "Foreign Interference"?'.

[90] Wendt, 'Anarchy is what states make of it', pp. 396–7.

[91] Stefano Guzzini, 'A reconstruction of constructivism in international relations', *European Journal of International Relations*, 6:2 (2000), pp. 147–82.

the value of the power-actor's incentives carries no meaning outside the target's intersubjective understandings: what outside observers may classify as trivial or pointless (be it a redefinition of bilateral relations, public expression of admiration, or an honorary title) could (and often does) represent a high value to a target.

The line separating negative and positive inducements is necessarily fluid, as the latter imply the former, for the withdrawal of incentives constitutes a punishment. Therefore, even if reliant on positive inducements, interference may appear coercive. At their most extreme, negative inducements can take the form of force (e.g. a military invasion) by denying targets the option to comply. The rationalist scholarship of power features numerous analyses of positive and negative economic instruments, disagreeing on their effectiveness in inducing the target's compliance with the power-actor's policy preferences.[92]

We agree with rationalist analysts who argue that material inducements may have causal effects by modifying targets' behaviour temporarily and instrumentally. However, we postulate that interference: (a) does not need to be material; and (b) may also participate in modifying targets' belief systems, identities, and related interests, rather than merely their behaviour, rendering outcomes inexplicable in terms of simple causation. Positive incentives signify that a power-actor's relationship with a target is based on friendship and trust and becomes an integral part of the target's stable cognitive environment. The withdrawal of positive inducements and/or deployment of actual or implied sanctions may reframe the power-target's identity as constituted in relation to the power-actor as the menacing 'other', potentially creating cognitive structures for enduring enmity between a power-actor and its target.

Interference is central to the Sinocentric relational theory of world politics, which argues that an exchange of incentives ('favours' or *renqing*) between a power-actor and its target induces a target into a relational cycle, enabling and constraining its behaviour.[93] In a Confucian cultural context, a target must repay a received 'favour' if it wants to maintain and strengthen a relationship with a power-actor. Repaying *renqing* need not be immediate or symmetrical, but it is essential. Without reciprocation, a target risks forgoing the relationship with the power-actor, ending the flow of rewards. However, as long as a power-actor and its target continuously reciprocate each other's 'favours', they start sharing some common interests and each other's resources, leading to win–win outcomes.[94] Recognising identities as multiple and socially constructed, the theory implies that as identities are shaped by social relations, so are interests.[95]

The empirical research on China's engagement with the Global South demonstrates that Beijing intentionally targets foreign elites with material inducements to shape their beliefs about China's civilisational superiority, proper international status, and 'core interests' on such issues as sovereignty and human rights. It also demonstrates that targets' reciprocation is not random, as it aligns with Beijing's diplomatic objectives.[96] Thus, the relational theory implicitly recognises the constitutive effects of interference on China's power-targets without problematising them.

In sum, our taxonomy of power is consistent with rationalism (and the relational theory) by considering power as relational and causal, material and ideational, intentional, multidimensional,

[92]See, for example, A. Cooper Drury, *Economic Sanctions and Presidential Decisions: Models of Political Rationality* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Robert A. Pape, 'Why economic sanctions do not work', *International Security*, 22:2 (1997), pp. 90–136; David A. Baldwin, *Economic Statecraft* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020); David A. Baldwin, *Power and International Relations: A Conceptual Approach* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).

[93]Yaqing Qin, 'A relational theory of world politics', *International Studies Review*, 18:1 (2016), pp. 33–47.

[94]Yaqing Qin, *A Relational Theory of World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 281–3.

[95]Qin, *A Relational Theory*, p. 132.

[96]Lina Benabdallah, 'Explaining attractiveness: Knowledge production and power projection in China's policy for Africa', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 22 (2019), pp. 495–514; Joshua Eisenman, 'Locating Africa in China's community of shared future for mankind: A relational approach', *Journal of International Development*, 35 (2023), pp. 65–78; Marina Rudyak, '"We help them, and they help us": Reciprocity and relationality in Chinese aid to Africa', *Journal of International Development*, 35 (2023), pp. 583–99.

and not necessarily involving an overt conflict of interests. It also seeks to account for the power practices manifesting in concrete political situations. However, it departs from rationalism in four crucial aspects.

- It considers power causal and *potentially* constitutive of actors' identities and interests, helping delineate self from 'other' as a friend or adversary or even blurring the boundary between self and 'other'.[97]
- Assuming identities as polymorphic and prior to interests, it rejects the rationalist notion of objective or real interests, considering interests to be process-like: multiple, fluid, always-in-the-making, ranging from a desire for ontological security to gaining material rewards.
- It conceives power-actors' ideas and incentives as having no meaning outside the target's intersubjective understandings.
- It places agency at its analytical centre because agency and interaction produce and reproduce structures of shared knowledge over time. The agency of both power-actors and their target(s) is intentional and rational but always limited: actors are never entirely free to act due to limitations imposed by other actors, material and ideational resources, and the norms and rules governing their interaction.

Sharing some common ground with rationalist power analysis, our taxonomy of power constitutes a 'via media'[98] between positivist and post-structuralist approaches. It also supports Baldwin's argument that power analysis may be a point of convergence for at least some rationalists and constructivists.[99]

Applying our theorisation to Melanesia

To demonstrate the applicability of our conceptual framework, we now discuss how our theorisation of presence, influence, and interference aids the analysis of China's activities in the Pacific Islands. We focus on Melanesia, a subregion which consists of Fiji, PNG, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu.[100] Our approach takes account of the power practices manifesting in concrete political situations[101] and as multidimensional in terms of actors, scale, scope, instruments, and cost.

The geography of the Melanesian subregion is diverse, with people spread across large, mountainous islands (especially in PNG), as well as tens of smaller islands, and hundreds of small islets and atolls. The terrain makes communications, transport, trade, and the provision of public services challenging. Separated by their terrains, many communities in Melanesia have developed within distinct ecological pockets.[102] Melanesia is therefore characterised by cultural and linguistic diversity; for example, it is home to 20 per cent of the world's languages. It is also characterised by uneven economic development, due to the geographical concentration of natural resources, and consequent opportunities for their exploitation, or of tourism and private sector activity (the latter two primarily in Fiji and Vanuatu). In areas without such resources, there have been few opportunities in the formal economy beyond village-based subsistence and agriculture. This has led many young people to migrate to urban settings, where there are high levels of un- and under-employment. Rapid demographic change has enhanced this problem, as substantial population increases have not always been met by corresponding economic growth or improvements to government services.

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[97]Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, p. 229.

[98]Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*.

[99]David A. Baldwin, 'Power and international relations', in Walter Carlesnaes, Thomas Risse, and Beth A. Simmons (eds), *Handbook of International Relations* (London: Sage, 2002), pp. 177–91.

[100]Melanesia also includes the Kanak population of New Caledonia. However, as New Caledonia is a French territory, it is excluded from our analysis.

[101]Baldwin, 'Power and international relations'.

[102]Robert C. Kiste, 'Pre-colonial times', in K. R. Howes, Robert C. Kiste, and Brij V, Lal (eds), *Tides of History: The Pacific Islands in the Twentieth Century* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994), pp. 3–28.

Population growth has also put pressure on governments' ability to provide public goods, such as education and health care.

Internal migration has also fuelled other social conflicts, such as disputes over rights to access and settle on customary land. For example, people from Solomon Islands' largest province – Malaita – have long migrated to the capital, Honiara (located in Guadalcanal province), in search of work. This, together with other causes (such as anger about frustrated decentralisation efforts, uneven economic development, disputes over land tenure and resource benefits, the continued relevance of local identities, and political patronage and corruption) gave rise to significant resentment amongst the people of Guadalcanal, triggering civil unrest referred to as 'The Tensions', which began in 1998.[103] The Tensions necessitated the multilateral (although largely Australian-funded and -staffed) Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) between 2003 and 2017 to help stabilise the country and rebuild the government. These factors continue to cause friction between Malaita and Guadalcanal provinces, manifesting as one of the underlying causes of riots in Honiara in November 2021, alongside resentment about Solomon Islands' 2019 diplomatic switch to China.[104] Notably, while Australia, New Zealand, Fiji, and PNG led the regional response to help restore stability, the Solomon Islands government subsequently invited China to provide training to its police force, ostensibly to help it respond to future unrest.

Agency of power-targets matters

Much of the commentary on China's influence has assumed that Pacific governments and other actors are 'passive dupes'.[105] In contrast, we argue that power is neither unilateral nor passively received. And attempts to exercise influence and interference are mediated by their recipients, each possessing specific identities and interests and located in various political structures and sociocultural contexts. We further argue that, in contrast to contemporary analyses of Chinese influence in the Pacific Islands that treat China and Pacific states as unitary actors and state identities as exogenously given and constant,[106] agency is not located exclusively in central governments. Expanding on the holistic variant of constructivism that brings 'the "corporate" and "social" together into a unified analytical perspective',[107] we postulate that it is necessary to depart from the state-centric approach and consider the domestic context of power relationships, because this is where 'actors contest norms and through political and social processes construct and reconstruct identities'.[108] Therefore, particular attention needs to be paid to the ways domestic identities and interests are formed through contests among Pacific actors, and how foreign power-actors seek to (re)shape these contests.

Problematising the domestic is critical in the highly diverse societies of Melanesia, where people often identify primarily with their kinship groups, rather than as citizens of their state. Indeed,

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[103]Jon Fraenkel, *The Manipulation of Custom: From Uprising to Intervention in the Solomon Islands* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2004); Matthew Allen, *Greed and Grievance: Ex-militants' Perspectives on the Conflict in Solomon Islands* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2013).

[104]Tarcisius Kabutaulaka quoted in Jordan Fennell, 'Australia defends its latest involvement in Solomon Islands, as leading political analyst calls for greater understanding', *ABC* (1 December 2021), available at: {https://www.abc.net.au/pacific/programs/pacificbeat/analyst-absolutely-certain-australia-not-interfering-solomons/13656652}.

[105]Anna Powles, Joanne Wallis, and Tess Newton Cain, 'Chinese whispers and Pacific agency', *Lowy Interpreter* (22 October 2018), available at: {https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/chinese-whispers-pacific-agency}.

[106]Connolly, 'Engaging China's new foreign policy'; Derek Grossman, Michael S. Chase, Gerard Finin, et al. *America's Pacific Allies: The Freely Associated States* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2019).

[107]Christian Reus-Smit, 'Imagining society: Constructivism', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 4:3 (2002), pp. 487–509 (p. 495).

[108]Peter J. Katzenstein, 'Introduction', in P. J. Katzenstein (ed.), *The Culture of National Security* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), pp. 1–32 (p. 26).

for many Melanesians, often their most important socio-political rights and obligations flow from their membership of an extended family, described as *wantokism*. In Melanesian Pidgin, *wantok* literally means 'one who speaks the same language', but it is more generally used to describe 'relations of obligation binding relatives, members of the same clan or tribal group, and much looser forms of association'.[109] The principle of reciprocity guides these rights and obligations, playing a central role in social relations, leadership, and interactions with other groups.[110] Therefore, national governments do not have a monopoly on authority; socio-political legitimacy and responsibility are widely dispersed, and relations between individuals are highly personalised. As the state has struggled to take root in much of Melanesia, local actors and institutions at the hamlet and village level maintain a degree of autonomy from the national government in both the political and economic realms.[111] This means that the central state must compete for allegiance with local socio-political institutions, churches, civil society organisations, and kinship groups, which often provide public goods when those provided by the state are inadequate or simply absent.[112] Each actor has its own identities and interests, as well as differentiated access to material and ideational resources. Therefore, an analysis of whether and how foreign influence or interference are being exercised in Melanesia is incomplete if it focuses solely on the state as a unitary object or central government. Instead, such an analysis requires 'a nuanced understanding of local agency and agendas' that recognises both the complementary and competing roles at the national, subnational, local, and individual scales and the different ways in which they interact with foreign actors.[113] It also requires seeking 'intimate and affective assessments of ground-level impacts' of economic statecraft by listening to 'local scale perspectives'.[114] This highlights the importance of the agency of power-targets, particularly their societal networks.

Power-actors are not unitary

At the same time, it is essential to recognise that power-actors are not unitary. For example, China as a centralised state with a single mind does not exist. Students of domestic China have long highlighted inter-agency competition and disjointed policymaking processes, referred to as 'fragmented authoritarianism'.[115] Recent analyses of China's foreign policy have begun noting a diversity of Chinese actors,[116] exploring their impact on Chinese foreign policy,[117] engagement with

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[109] Sinclair Dinnen, *Law and Order in a Weak State: Crime and Politics in Papua New Guinea* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001), p. 203.

[110] Judith A. Bennett, 'Roots of Conflict in Solomon Islands – Though Much Is Taken, Much Abides: Legacies of Tradition and Colonialism', State Society and Governance in Melanesia Discussion Paper 2002/5, Australian National University (2002).

[111] Shahar Hameiri and Lee Jones, 'Beyond hybridity to the politics of scale: International intervention and "local" politics', *Development and Change*, 48:1 (2017), pp. 54–77; Sinclair Dinnen and Matthew Allen, 'Solomon Islands in transition?', *Journal of Pacific History*, 50:4 (2015), pp. 381–97.

[112] Hank Nelson, 'Governments, States and Labels', State Society and Governance in Melanesia Discussion Paper 2006/1, Australian National University (2006).

[113] Sinclair Dinnen and Matthew Allen, 'State absence and state formation in Solomon Islands: Reflections on agency, scale and hybridity', *Development and Change*, 47:1 (2016), pp. 76–97 (p. 94).

[114] Henryk Szadziewski, 'Everyday geoeconomics: The Belt and Road Initiative in Oceania', *Geographical Research*, 59 (2021), pp. 483–8 (pp. 485, 487).

[115] Kenneth Lieberthal and Michel Oksenberg, *Policy Making in China: Leaders, Structures and Processes* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988); Lee Jones and Shahar Hameiri, *Fractured China: How State Transformation Is Shaping China's Rise* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

[116] Linda Jakobson and Dean Knox, 'New Foreign Policy Actors in China', SIPRI Policy Paper 26, SIPRI (2010).

[117] Shuan Breslin, 'China and the South: Objectives, actors and interactions', *Development & Change*, 44:6 (2013), pp. 1273–94; Denghua Zhang and Graeme Smith, 'China's foreign aid system: Structure, agencies, and identities', *Third World Quarterly*, 38:10 (2017), pp. 2330–46.

neighbouring countries,[118] and liberal democracies' domestic or subnational politics.[119] Thus, China's role in the Pacific is best analysed using the non-unitary actor approach.

In much of the commentary, Chinese state and non-state actors (including migrants and businesses), are believed to implement – directly or indirectly – the PRC government's geostrategy.[120] For example, such was Australia's concern about Chinese telecommunications company Huawei bidding to build PNG and Solomon Islands' undersea communications cable that the Australian government agreed to fund and build the cable itself. Despite this, the PNG government contracted Huawei Marine to build its domestic undersea cable, and Solomon Islands engaged Huawei to build its domestic telecommunication towers. When China Mobile engaged in talks to acquire the Pacific's largest private telecommunications company, Digicel, Australia provided US$1.3 billion in funding to its telecommunications company, Telstra, to instead purchase Digicel. That figure was larger than the annual Australian aid budget to the region.

While Huawei and China Mobile are perceived as potentially acting on behalf of the PRC central authorities, some Chinese non-state actors can subvert rather than facilitate Beijing's geostrategy. For example, the Chinese diaspora operating in local markets in the Pacific can undermine social cohesion, particularly if they are perceived to interfere in government. This was demonstrated after the 2006 general election in Solomon Islands, when rioters targeted Chinese-owned small businesses in Honiara's Chinatown because of a perception that they had 'influenced the result of the election'.[121] When riots again broke out in Honiara in November 2021, buildings owned by Chinese migrants were again targeted, revealing that local resentments about the perceived role the Chinese diaspora plays in the government had not abated. The targeting of Chinese businesses also highlighted the resentment that many Solomon Islanders feel about the comparative commercial success of migrant Chinese,[122] which may frustrate the Chinese government's attempts to improve its relationships in the region.

Ideas matter

Since we conceive of influence as power by socialisation, it is necessary to analyse how power-actors, such as China, seek to (re)shape targets' identities and interests. Analysing the strategic narratives deployed by foreign powers is particularly useful. Strategic narratives can 'explain the world and set constraints on the imaginable and actionable, and shape perceived interests'.[123] They are effective tools of influence because 'if public discourse is dominated by one narrative, then for most people any additional narrative-consonant information is likely to be believed simply because it is compatible with other information in memory'.[124] Authoritarian states, such as China and Russia, are believed to be using 'weaponised narratives' to pursue their strategic interests.[125]

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[118]Czeslaw Tubilewicz and Kanishka Jayasuriya, 'Internationalization of the Chinese subnational state and capital', *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 69:2 (2015), pp. 185–204; James Reilly, *Orchestration: China's Economic Statecraft across Asia and Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

[119]Andrew Chubb, 'The securitization of "Chinese influence" in Australia', *Journal of Contemporary China*, 32:139 (2023), pp. 17–34; Czeslaw Tubilewicz and Natalie Omond, *The United States' Subnational Relations with Divided China: A Constructivist Approach to Paradiplomacy* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021).

[120]Connolly, 'Engaging China's new foreign policy'; Grossman et al., *America's Pacific Allies*.

[121]Tarcisius Tara Kabutaulaka and Louisa Kabutaulaka, 'Solomon Islands', *The Contemporary Pacific*, 19:2 (2007), pp. 597–605 (p. 599); Sinclair Dinnen and Stewart Firth (eds), *Politics and State Building in Solomon Islands* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2008).

[122]Bennett, 'Roots of Conflict in Solomon Islands'; Tarcisius Kabutaulaka, 'Beyond Ethnicity: The Political Economy of the Guadalcanal Crisis in Solomon Islands', State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Working Paper 01/1, Australian National University (2001).

[123]Laura Roselle, Alister Miskimmon, and Ben O'Loughlin, 'Strategic narratives', *Media, War & Conflict*, 7:1 (2014), pp. 70–84 (p. 76).

[124]Stephan Lewandowsky, Werner G.K. Stritzke, Alexandra M. Freund, Klaus Oberauer, and Joachim I. Krueger, 'Misinformation, disinformation, and violent conflict', *American Psychologist*, 68:7 (2013), pp. 487–501 (p. 490).

[125]Chris Zappone and Matthew Sussex, 'Addressing Australia's Vulnerability to Weaponised Narratives', Policy Options Paper No. 9, Australian National University (2018).

Recognising the salience of ideas as instruments of power, Australia promotes a narrative of the 'Pacific family' to emphasise its deep and long-standing relationships.[126] In contrast, China has promoted 'south–south cooperation',[127] the 'Belt and Road',[128] and, more recently, the 'Blue Pacific',[129] which echoes the narrative adopted by the region's major multilateral institution, the Pacific Islands Forum, since 2017.[130] These narratives are conveyed via mainstream and social media, with China making significant investments in radio and television broadcasting[131] following the reduction of the Australian media presence.[132] However, this does not deny the agency of the target audience(s), whose perceptions, biases, heuristics, culture, and language determine their interpretation of and receptivity to narratives.[133]

Described as representing an 'anticipatory geography' with a 'core message' of 'economic hope' and the 'potential to reconfigure spaces and identities',[134] these narratives are not accepted uncritically; civil society stakeholders have expressed scepticism and, at times, concern, about China–Pacific relations.[135] Even the Chinese diaspora in the Pacific questions China's diplomacy in the region.[136] And Pacific leaders frequently instrumentalise these narratives for their own political purposes.[137] For example, at a March 2024 campaign rally in Malaita's provincial capital Auki, then prime minister Manasseh Sogavare claimed that the diplomatic switch to China 'put Solomon Islands on the map' and praised the Chinese socio-economic system as superior to the US and the 'Chinese government's values' as more suitable to a Christian country such as Solomon Islands.[138]

As elsewhere, foreign powers are increasingly active in the region's information domain, occasionally relying on disinformation when promoting strategic narratives.[139] While disinformation campaigns are long-standing – with front organisations, agent provocateurs, leafleting, forgeries, and black propaganda common tools – information technology, particularly the growing popularity of social media, has lowered the barriers to entry and facilitated the speed and spread of 'fake news', photoshopped images, leaking, hacking, and trolling.[140] Disinformation campaigns can

[126] Joanne Wallis, 'The enclosure and exclusion of Australia's "Pacific family"', *Political Geography*, 106 (2023), p. 102935, available at: {https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2023.102935}.

[127] Joanne Wallis, Geyi Xie, William Waqavakatoga, Priestley Habru, and Maima Koro, 'Ordering the islands? Pacific responses to China's strategic narratives', *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 16:4 (2023), pp. 457–81; Herr, *Chinese Influence in the Pacific Islands*.

[128] Henryk Szadziewski, 'Converging anticipatory geographies in Oceania: The Belt and Road Initiative and Look North in Fiji', *Political Geography*, 77 (2022), p. 102119.

[129] Joanne Wallis, Maima Koro, and Corey O'Dwyer, 'The "Blue Pacific" strategic narrative: Rhetorical action, acceptance, entrapment, and appropriation?', *The Pacific Review* 37(4) (2024), pp. 797–824.

[130] Pacific Islands Forum, 'Forum Communique', 48th Pacific Islands Forum, Apia, 5–8 September 2017.

[131] Denghua Zhang and Amanda Watson, 'China's Media Strategy in the Pacific', Department of Pacific Affairs Issue Brief 2020/29, Australian National University (2020).

[132] Graeme Dobell, Geoff Heriot, and Jemima Garrett, *Hard News and Free Media as the Sharp Edge of Australian Soft Power* (Canberra: Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 2018).

[133] Nicholas D. Wright, 'From Control to Influence: Cognition in the Grey Zone', Report for the Pentagon Joint Staff Strategic Multilayer Assessment Group, University of Birmingham (2017).

[134] Szadziewski, 'Converging anticipatory geographies', p. 2.

[135] Zhang, 'China's influence and local perceptions'.

[136] Denghua Zhang, 'China's diplomacy and diaspora perceptions: Evidence from the Pacific region', *Asia & the Pacific Policy Studies*, 10 (2023), pp. 46–62.

[137] Wallis, et al., 'Ordering the islands?'.

[138] Manasseh Sogavare, quoted in Nick Sas, Stephen Dziedzic, and Chrisnrita Aumanu-Leong, 'Solomon Islands prime minister critical of democracy, praises "Chinese-style" governance', *ABC News* (20 March 2024), available at: {https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-03-20/solomon-islands-prime-minister-defends-chinese-governance-style/103606172}.

[139] Alexander Lanoszka, 'Disinformation in international politics', *European Journal of International Security*, 4:2 (2019), pp. 227–48.

[140] Martin Kragh and Sebastian Asberg, 'Russia's strategy for influence through diplomacy', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 40:6 (2017), pp. 773–816; Hunt Allcott and Matthew Gentzkow, 'Social media and fake news in the 2016 election', *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 31:2 (2017), pp. 211–36.

succeed because they can exploit prejudices, heuristics, and lived experiences[141] and affect voting intentions.[142] Disinformation campaigns may attempt to influence the mass public or target certain political or social groups, including the diaspora of the disinforming state.[143]

Although infrastructure and other constraints mean that access to the information domain is limited and disparate in the Pacific, the proliferation of mobile technology sees access constantly improving.[144] When the Solomon Islands government temporarily banned Facebook in 2020 – a major regional forum for public political debate and information sharing, as it is often included free in mobile phone data plans – on the basis that it facilitated 'abusive language' and 'character assassination',[145] commentators speculated that the Chinese government influenced this decision and that it constituted a 'brazen assault on the freedom of expression'.[146] Some considered the Facebook ban to be partly intended to quell public debate on the 2019 decision to switch diplomatic recognition to China.[147] More recently, misinformation played a role in discouraging people from accessing Covid-19 vaccinations, particularly in Solomon Islands and PNG,[148] aided by claims that Chinese actors attempted to discredit Western-manufactured Covid-19 vaccines.[149]

Power relationships are not necessarily dyadic

The above discussion highlights that power is not exercised in a vacuum. Much of the debate about assumed Chinese influence in the Pacific analyses Chinese power in absolute terms, rather than relative to other actors. For example, Australia continues to provide by far the largest amount of aid to the region and has overtaken China as the largest provider of bilateral loans. Although Chinese aid and lending to the region increased over the last decade, a 2023 analysis found that aid peaked in 2016 but has since declined and that China has 'shifted away from large-scale infrastructure finance' since 2019.[150] Given the opacity of China's political system, there are also questions about the reliability of previous estimates of China's aid flows.

The quality of Chinese projects, particularly large infrastructure projects, remains uncertain.[151] Notably, in 2023 Pacific Islands Forum leaders approved Pacific Quality Infrastructure Principles 'to support quality infrastructure development in the region in line with Pacific priorities'.[152] Furthermore, Chinese infrastructure projects have typically favoured employing Chinese workers, which has generated tensions, as locals can resent the loss of employment opportunities. And even when locals find employment in the Chinese funded projects, one cannot assume

[141]Brian C Rathbun, Joshua D. Kertzer, Jason Reifler, Paul Goren, and Thomas J. Scotto, 'Taking foreign policy personally: Personal values', *International Studies Quarterly*, 60:1 (2016), pp. 124–37.

[142]Carl T. Bergstrom and Joseph B. Bak-Coleman, 'Information gerrymandering in social networks skews collective decision-making', *Nature*, 573 (2019), pp. 40–1.

[143]Kragh and Asberg, 'Russia's strategy for influence through diplomacy'.

[144]Lauren Dickey, Erica Downs, Andrew Taffer, et al., *Mapping the Information Environment in the Pacific Island Countries: Disruptors, Deficits, and Decisions* (Arlington: CNA, 2019).

[145]Dorothy Wickham and Ben Doherty, 'Solomon Islands government preparing to ban Facebook', *The Guardian* (17 November 2020).

[146]Peter Kenilorea, quoted in Wickham and Doherty, 'Solomon Islands government preparing to ban Facebook'.

[147]Edward Cavanough, 'After criticisms, the Solomon Islands proposes Facebook ban', *The Diplomat* (20 November 2020).

[148]Benjamin Lokshin, *The Pacific COVID-19 Infodemic: Challenges and Opportunities in the Pacific's Response to an Online Information Crisis* (San Francisco: The Asia Foundation, 2020); Johnny Blades, 'Warnings to anti-vaxxers slowing rollout in Solomons and PNG', *RNZ* (18 June 2021), available at: {https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/444972/warnings-to-anti-vaxxers-slowing-rollout-in-solomons-and-png}.

[149]Gerry Shih, 'China turbocharges bid to discredit Western vaccines, spread virus conspiracy', *The Washington Post* (20 January 2021); Huizhong Wu, 'China pushes conspiracy theories of COVID origin, vaccines', *AP* (25 January 2021), available at: {https://apnews.com/article/china-coronavirus-origin-65c6958bb2d8d22d811bb3d0c90f7418}.

[150]Dayant et al., Lowy Institute Pacific Aid Map: 2023 Key Findings Report', p. 5.

[151]Rajah, Dayant, and Pryke, *Ocean of Debt? Belt and Road and Debt Diplomacy in the Pacific*.

[152]Pacific Islands Forum, 'Communique: Fifty-second Pacific Islands Forum', 6–10 November 2023, Rarotonga, Cook Islands, available at: {https://forumsec.org/publications/communique-52nd-pacific-islands-leaders-forum-2023}.

their gratitude for Chinese largesse. For example, a study of the Ramu nickel mine in PNG found 'genuine friendships … formed between the two [Chinese and Papua New Guinean] work-forces, based on shared opposition to management practices, and, to an extent, on shared class identity'.[153]

China is Solomon Islands' largest trading partner, taking 50% of Solomon Islands' exports in 2022 (compared to Australia, which took 3.6%).[154] But China is not the largest export market for any other Melanesian state; it is both PNG and Vanuatu's second-largest export destination (taking 21.6% of PNG exports and 13.5% of Vanuatu exports) but sits behind Japan in PNG (24% of exports)[155] and Australia in Vanuatu (17.5% of exports).[156] China is not even among Fiji's top five trading partners; Fiji's largest export market is the US (21%).[157]

Although the Solomon Islands–China security agreement attracted significant attention, this overlooks the fact that Solomon Islands already had a security agreement with Australia (signed in 2017). Australia's continued role as Solomon Islands 'security partner of choice'[158] was demon-strated during the November 2023 Pacific Games in Honiara. At the request of the Solomon Islands government, Australia deployed the large landing ship dock vessel HMAS *Choules* to support 100 Australian federal police (on top of the 50 already present since the 2021 riots) and 350 Australian defence force personnel. The Australian contingent cooperated with smaller deployments from Fiji, New Zealand, and PNG. In contrast, China sent a small police liaison team. And while there was concern about the potential that the security agreement may pave the way for a Chinese mil-itary presence in Solomon Islands, the US has had a status of forces agreement with Solomon Islands since 1991. The US and France already have substantial military bases in the region, and Australia has an indirect defence presence in all Pacific states via its Pacific Maritime Security Programme.[159]

Moreover, competing power-actors may undermine or bolster each other. Thus, analyses of influence and interference need to account for these dynamics rather than assuming a dyadic relationship between a particular power-actor and its target. This again highlights the role of agency, as a target can reverse its relationship with a power-actor through its relationships with alternative power-actors. Indeed, some power-actors can become dependent on their targets, as demonstrated by Taiwan's competition for diplomatic recognition and reliance on a diminishing number of partner states. And targets can seek to harness the interest of power-actors. For exam-ple, the concept of the 'Blue Pacific Continent' – first articulated by the Pacific Islands Forum in 2017[160] and adopted by Forum leaders as the guiding principle in the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent[161] – signals to external powers that they must engage on the region's terms and support regional priorities.[162]

[153]Graeme Smith, 'Nupela masta? Local and expatriate labour in a Chinese-run nickel mine in Papua New Guinea', *Asian Studies Review*, 37:2 (2013), pp. 178–95 (p. 191).

[154]DFAT, 'Solomon Islands country economic fact sheet', available at: {https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/solo-cef.pdf}.

[155]DFAT, 'Papua New Guinea economic and trade data', available at: {https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/png-cef.pdf}.

[156]DFAT, 'Vanuatu economic and trade fact sheet', available at: {https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/vanu-cef.pdf}.

[157]DFAT, 'Fiji economic and trade data', available at: {https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/fiji-cef.pdf}.

[158]Solomon Islands Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare, quoted in Lice Movono and Kate Lyons, 'Solomon Islands PM rules out China military base and says Australia is "security partner of choice"', *The Guardian* (14 July 2022).

[159]Joanne Wallis and Michael Rose, 'Statecraftiness: Mapping statecraft in the Pacific Islands', available at: https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/b047ee4be82e47a8a6f3e580cf688d40}.

[160]Pacific Islands Forum, 'Communique'.

[162]Tarcisius Kabutaulaka, 'Mapping the Blue Pacific in a changing regional order', in Graeme Smith and Terence Wesley-Smith (eds), *The China Alternative: Changing Regional Order in the Pacific Islands* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2021), pp. 41–69; Wesley Morgan, 'Large ocean states: Pacific regionalism and climate security in a new era of geostrategic competition', *East Asia*, 39:1 (2022), pp. 45–62; Sandra Tarte, 'Reconciling regional security narratives in the Pacific', *East Asia*, 39:1 (2022), pp. 29–43; Wallis, Koro, and O'Dwyer, 'The "Blue Pacific" strategic narrative'.

In another example, former Solomon Islands prime minister Manasseh Sogavare seemingly instrumentalised diplomatic competition between China and Taiwan to solidify his political position when orchestrating the diplomatic switch to China.[163] After signing the security agreement with China, Solomon Islands received visits from US high-level officials Campbell and Kritenbrink in April 2022, and Sogavare was invited to the White House for the first US–Pacific Islands Summit in September 2022, where he posed alongside US president Joe Biden in the 'family' photo. As noted, Sogavare received a further visit from Campbell and a high-level US delegation in March 2023. The US reopened its Cold War–era embassy in Honiara in January 2023. Solomon Islands has also leveraged competition for material gain: rivalry between Australia and China to strengthen Solomon Islands' policing capacity saw the two states donate weapons, vehicles, and other hardware to the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force in November 2022.

Similarly, Daniel Suidani, who until February 2023 was premier of Solomon Islands' Malaita province, instrumentalised Taiwan's interest in maintaining diplomatic relations to bolster his position. As noted, one of the contributing factors to the Tensions in Solomon Islands was frustrated calls for political decentralisation, which continue to cause friction between Malaita and Guadalcanal provinces. As Suidani claimed that Malaitans saw the switch to recognising China as 'totemic of the national government's tendency to ignore the province's wishes', he said that he had 'responded deftly' and 'worked hard to bolster his anti-China – and anti-Sogavare – credentials' which, at least initially, helped him to build some local and international popularity.[164] In addition to banning ethnic Chinese people from operating businesses in Malaita, Suidani brokered a (para-)diplomatic partnership between Malaita province and Taiwan. This led to Taiwanese aid coming directly to the province, angering the national government. In sum, attempts by China, Taiwan, the US, and others to influence government decision-making concerning diplomatic recognition are mediated, among other factors, by local political relationships, interest groups, and separatist movements.

The meaning of incentives is intersubjectively established

When interviewed in 2019 for the *60 Minutes* report, Suidani claimed that he had been offered – and had refused – one million [SBD] dollars to support Solomon Islands' diplomatic recognition of China – described in the report as a 'diplomatic bribe'.[165] The Suidani-led Malaita provincial government instead leveraged its position on the China–Taiwan sovereignty conflict to access Taiwan's foreign aid, and a considerable share (US$25 million out of US$200 million) of new US funding.[166] This illustrates two crucial issues central to our taxonomy of power. First, while foreign powers' influence and interference in the Pacific can appear to outside observers as unilateral and reliant on material rewards objectively expressed in US dollars, in reality, power-targets – such as the Malaita governmen – can exercise their agency to create a reverse-dependent relationship with the power-actor. Second, incentives carry no meaning outside the framework of intersubjective understandings: the Chinese funding was characterised by Suidani as a bribe, acceptance of which would have amounted to an immoral act. In contrast, Taiwanese and US material rewards were understood to constitute developmental assistance provided by friends.

In February 2023, a majority of the Malaita provincial assembly voted to remove Suidani as provincial premier. One of his advisors, Celsus Talifilu, claimed this occurred because the national government had 'not been happy about the stand Malaita province has taken against Chinese companies and Chinese funding'.[167] At the same time, most MPs from Malaita province supported the

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[163]Edward Cavanough, 'When China came calling: Inside the Solomon Islands switch', *The Guardian* (8 December 2019).

[164]Edward Cavanough, 'Solomon Islands and the switch from Taiwan to China, *The Saturday Paper* (15 January 2022).

[165]Harvey, 'China's "soft invasion" of the South Pacific'.

[166]Evan Wasuka, 'US pumps $25 m into Solomon Islands' rebel province', *ABC News* (15 October 2020).

[167]Quoted in Eryk Bagshaw, 'Pacific China opponent ousted', *Sydney Morning Herald* (11 February 2023).

Sogavare government in the national parliament, signalling that portrayals of the province as uniformly aligned with Taiwan[168] overlooked local political dynamics. While there were small riots to protest Suidani's removal, other factors, such as provincial politics, frustration with stalled development – particularly lack of access to Chinese development opportunities – and competing business interests, were likely as influential, if not more so, on the vote of no confidence than any claimed pressure by the Sogavare government.

Since Solomon Islands switched diplomatic recognition to China in 2019, the Chinese have channelled considerable funding into infrastructure projects around Honiara, particularly for the 2023 Pacific Games.[169] During the 2024 election campaign then prime minister Sogavare continued to emphasise 'how China had helped [his] country in ways never seen before'.[170] However, the former prime minister's enthusiasm about the materially beneficial partnership with China was not necessarily universally shared. Domestic critics argued that the 'burden to develop our beloved Solomon Islands … rests squarely on the shoulders of the government and people of Solomon Islands themselves', rather than on China or other development partners.[171] And political analysts suggested that the 'real issues' affecting the country remain unresolved: 'We need to start from small things: feed our people, so people are happy and have jobs.'[172] Notably, while Sogavare was re-elected to parliament in April 2024, he was replaced as prime minister by Jeremiah Manele. Manele is a member of the same party (and appointed Sogavare finance minister) and was foreign affairs minister at the time of the diplomatic switch to China. However, observers consider him more 'inclusive', 'friendly and humble', and as having a 'more business-as-usual approach to diplomatic ties with China', compared to Sogavare's 'increasingly cosy relationship with Beijing'.[173]

Solomon Islands' decision to switch diplomatic recognition to, and enter into a security agreement with, China symbolises former prime minister Sogavare's rapid appreciation of the 'China game', i.e. the norms and practices of appropriate relations with China, intersubjectively established across the region. In the lead-up to the diplomatic switch, the Solomon Islands government had formed a bipartisan working group to examine the viability of restoring official relations with China. At the same time, another bipartisan group toured China and other Pacific states that have diplomatic relations with China. For its part, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and External Trade prepared a cabinet paper. Based on that combined advice and driven by a 'socio-political and economic agenda', the Solomon Islands government decided to make the switch.[174] That agenda also influenced the government's decision to sign the 2022 security agreement, with the added urgency for Sogavare of 'diversifying his country's security partnerships' after the 2021 Honiara riots.[175]

Conclusion

We postulate that our taxonomy of power as composed of three modes of power: power as dormant capability (*presence*), power as socialisation (*influence*), and power as incentives (*interference*) facilitates a more nuanced understanding of how foreign powers (including China) operate in

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[168]See, for example, Cleo Paskal, 'Former Malaita premier (and noted China critic) gets bipartisan support for US visa', *The Diplomat* (1 April 2023).

[169]'China builds stadium for Pacific Games 2023', *Islands Business* (19 January 2023).

[170]Quoted in Sas, Dziedzic, and Aumanu-Leong, 'Solomon Islands prime minister critical of democracy'.

[171]Peter Kenilorea Junior, quoted in Sas, Dziedzic, and Aumanu-Leong, 'Solomon Islands prime minister critical of democracy'.

[172]David Gegeo, quoted in Sas, Dziedzic, and Aumanu-Leong, 'Solomon Islands prime minister critical of democracy'.

[173]Priestley Habru and Claudina Habru, 'Will Solomon Islands' new leader stay close to China?', *The Conversation* (2 May 2024), available at: {https://theconversation.com/will-solomon-islands-new-leader-stay-close-to-china-227905}.

[174]Derek Futaiasi, Priestley Habru, Maima Koro, William Waqavakatoga, and Henrietta McNeill, *Lalaga, Tithiki, Talia Vata: Pacific Islands Weaving Statecraft* (Adelaide: Stretton Institute, University of Adelaide, 2023), p. 8.

[175]Jon Fraenkel and Graeme Smith, 'The Solomons–China 2022 security deal: Extraterritoriality and the perils of militarisation in the Pacific Islands', *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 76:5 (2022), pp. 473–85 (p. 474).

the Pacific Islands. By applying our taxonomy to a case study of the Melanesian subregion, we have argued that the dominant debate over- and underestimates China's power in the region. It overestimates it because power is not merely material, unidirectional, and involving only states-as-a-whole or governing elites. Material power can contribute to tactical – perhaps short-term – changes in target states' foreign policymaking, as theorised by rationalists and demonstrated by the recent diplomatic switches made by Solomon Islands, Kiribati, and Nauru. But foreign power-actors (including those acting on behalf of the PRC authorities), when seeking to secure Pacific states' long-term compliance with their geo-economic objectives, must navigate complex authority structures, coordinate the activities of state and non-state actors operating in the region, and address the often-unintended consequences of their activities. They also need to compete with other powers.

At the same time, the dominant debate in Australia and the US about China's relations with Pacific states underestimates the China challenge. Focusing primarily on material resources, it overlooks the potential for Chinese power to mould the identities and interests of Pacific elites and the broader public in a constitutive, long-term fashion. Pacific state and non-state actors' pre-existing norms, values, and beliefs necessarily mediate the success of Chinese efforts to socialise them with the 'China game' through normative persuasion and interference (i.e. material and non-material rewards). Yet some Pacific elites may find the rules, norms, and practices guiding appropriate relations with China consistent with their ideational order. Their internalisation of the 'China game' may lead to the alignment of Pacific states' policies with what Beijing defines as 'core interests', including the 'one China' principle. It may also result in Pacific actors understanding regional and global politics through Beijing's lens and converging their interests with those of China's, to the detriment of Australia, the US, and their partners. This highlights why analysts should resist the temptation to be mesmerised by the expenditure of material power resources and to ignore the constitutive consequences of China's exercise of power, because the latter – while more challenging to account for – might ultimately have the most enduring impact.

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