

Balancing United States and Chinese Influence in Papua New Guinea: Opportunities for South Pacific Cooperation

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Abstract

This article is an attempt to analyse whether Pacific Island countries are trying to balance between the Chinese and the United States (US) interests in the South Pacific region. It looks at the Chinese attempts to attract South Pacific countries and the Chinese actions to ascertain its interests in the region. Since the region consists of 13 countries and the dynamics between each country with the two global powers are evolving, the article takes up the relations between Papua New Guinea (PNG) with the US and China as a case study. This article attempts to highlight the benefits of the balancing act for the Pacific Island Countries through the lens of PNG. Further, it analyses whether the balancing game is sustainable in the long run. It concludes by briefly looking at the opportunities this regional dynamic might present for India. The analysis indicates that though PNG can maintain a balance between the US and Chinese interests, which has benefited it so far, it would require time and deeper study into different South Pacific countries for a conclusive sustainability argument.

Introduction

The world's attention was drawn to the South Pacific in Jul 2024, as China offered security deals to Papua New Guinea (PNG). The offer had come after a line of security deals signed

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by China with Pacific Island Countries (PIC) in 2023 (Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, etc).¹ While the details of the security deal are not public yet, it was opined that China's deal would cater to the internal policing needs of these nations. What followed this offer from China was a scramble from the United States (US) with counteroffers to maintain the status quo within the region.² The US (and its allies, Australia, and Japan) consider the South Pacific as its area of interest, while PNG is officially deemed a 'Traditional Security Partner'.³ The US-South Pacific relations date back to World War II's (WWII) Battle of the Coral Sea in the Pacific Theatre, establishing the base of future US relations within the region.⁴ However, even with the West's historically significant influence, the PIC in the South Pacific have become the largest concentration of states to recognise Beijing over Taiwan⁵ within the last five years, causing a huge diplomatic blow to the US in its own backyard. PNG was no different, despite the US State Department officially describing it as a 'Like-minded Democracy' and a 'Key partner for the US in the Indo-Pacific region' in its congressional report.⁶ China's increasing interest in the South Pacific is important to observe when placed within the broader context of the Indo-Pacific and the New Cold War⁷ dynamics with the US. Furthermore, within the South Pacific, PNG makes for an interesting case study as it has been at the centre of increased attention from both China and the US. Therefore, this article posits a question of whether PNG is towing a great balancing act between the East and the West. The article uses secondary resources of qualitative nature and employs content analysis as the research method, grounded in the interpretivist methodological framework within international relations. Lastly, to keep true to the nature of this journal, the article also looks at areas of opportunity for India in the South Pacific and PNG, amid the ongoing global power tussle.

China's Interests in the South Pacific

Chinese interests in the South Pacific can be summarised in four aspects: The narrative for leading the Global South, the counter to the US containment, the diplomatic competition with Taiwan, and its own political and security ambitions. China came up with a new foreign policy strategy to establish relations with developing states in the Global South in the early 2010s.⁸ To establish its footing as the leader of the Global South, the Chinese initiatives are pitched as an attempt to establish a 'Fairer and more

reasonable' world order.⁹ Though the Chinese presence in the South Pacific can be traced to early migration in the mid-19th Century, the relationship observed today can be attributed to PIC's signing up to be a part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).¹⁰ As a part of it, the Chinese President Xi Jinping declared the South Pacific as the 'Southern Leg' of the 'Maritime Silk Road' in 2013.¹¹ Subsequently, in 2014, with the aim of 'Collective security, prospering together', China and eight PICs announced a strategic partnership.¹²

The China-PIC strategic partnership began as the Chinese counter to the perceived 'US Containment'.¹³ China has been actively participating in the battle of narratives. It counters the American narrative of 'Unfair Chinese practices' with its own narrative of the 'US containment of China'.¹⁴ For China, the South Pacific also became an area of diplomatic competition with Taiwan by motivating Taiwanese supporters, politically and economically, to cut diplomatic ties with the latter.¹⁵ Tied to this are also the security and political aspirations of China. The political aspiration includes attempts at altering the existing power structures and bringing in a new global governance structure.¹⁶ The South Pacific became an ideal location for this political ambition as it is small in size, unlike Africa, and has been under the US's area of influence since WWII, and is also placed beyond China's 'Second Island Chain'. China engaged with PICs by creating narratives around colonial history, South-South Cooperation, and the BRI as PIC's tool to shed the Western sanctions (as seen in Fiji).¹⁷ As the competition between the US and China increased, the PICs emerged as an area of military and strategic significance for the Chinese.¹⁸ Chinese scholars like Wang Fan have argued that smaller nations will be the site for the new proxy wars in the new Cold War scenario.¹⁹ Another reason for the increased interest is that the South Pacific controls trade routes and sea lanes of communications essential for the US and its close allies like Australia and Japan. Furthermore, China's attempt to engage in security deals with the PICs is also to secure the Chinese ambition²⁰ of increasing its capability to maintain and deploy forces far away from the mainland²¹, leading to the creation of the 'Third Island Chain'²².

The Balancing Act of Papua New Guinea

PNG is an island country in the cluster of the South Pacific Islands group. It occupies the eastern part of New Guinea Island and shares its land boundary with Indonesia on the west.²³ It is also Australia's much-forgotten closest neighbour, with only 3.7 kms to its nearest soil point across the Torres Strait.²⁴ In 2017, the Chinese Ministry of Commerce Report on PNG termed it as the 'Junction between Asia and the Pacific'.²⁵ It is because of its geography and participation in the BRI that PNG has found itself drawn into the new Cold War dynamics.

Analysing the exchanges between PNG and global powers, it can be argued that after noticing an increased interest by global powers after 2017, the PNG leadership opted for a two-pronged strategy. Firstly, they decided that PNG should be a part of major global initiatives coming its way, and secondly, it sought to maximise this opportunity of nations coming to it with deals that were tailored specifically for PNG's needs. Ever since PNG started BRI negotiations with China, there has been a visible increase in diplomatic engagement from its Western allies, as witnessed by the 'Step Up' foreign policy by Australia in 2017 to bolster infrastructure, healthcare, and education, New Zealand's 'Pacific Rollout' focussing on climate change, and the US' 'Pacific Partnership Strategy' to address PNG's security needs and diplomatic engagement.²⁶ In the meantime, the Chinese investments under BRI have also gained popular local interest. However, like most BRI investments, the PNG's local political leadership is increasingly worrying about excessive dependence on China and the population being left bereft of trickle-down benefits promised to them, which is in turn leading to strain in the relations with China. PNG is experiencing the same situation as the opposition leadership, which has made official statements regarding the overdependence on China and the lack of opportunities for the natives. This led to a change in regime in 2019. Since then, Prime Minister (PM) James Marape's government has been trying to achieve his strategy of non-alignment by trying to appease both China and the US. He has tried reaching out to China for an USD 11.8 bn loan to refinance the national debt while securing a USD 1.5 bn loan with lenient borrowing conditions from Australia instead.²⁷ Similarly, in 2020, PNG signed a new Comprehensive Strategic and Economic Partnership with Australia, while

announcing its commitment to the PNG–China bilateral relationship, dubbing it an ‘Important development, investment, and trade partner’²⁸. As of 2023, though Australia remains the largest foreign investor in PNG, China (through projects financed by the Asia Development Bank) has become its largest creditor.²⁹

PNG has been towing a great balancing act militarily as well. On the Chinese front, the PNG Defence Force has established links with the Chinese People’s Liberation Army since 2015.³⁰ As part of the arrangement, PNG has been acquiring equipment for itself from a defined Chinese budget.³¹ Also, annual meetings are held between the two forces, in addition to posting defence attachés, military aid, and training for the PNG military and police officers in Chinese military colleges.³² In the face of increasing security proximity with the Chinese, PNG has also entered into a partnership with the US through the Global Fragility Act in order to stabilise its internal security.³³ It attended the first US-Pacific Summit in Sep 2022, which culminated in the signing of a defence agreement in May 2023.³⁴ A separate agreement was also signed by PNG and the US for protection from illegal fishing through increased surveillance of PNG’s exclusive economic zone by the US Coast Guard.³⁵ PNG has gained a total of USD 45 mn in funds from the US for security and economic cooperation, which includes protective equipment for PNG Defence Forces.³⁶ This was followed by another security pact with Australia in Dec 2023.³⁷ As recent as the third week of Jul 2024, PNG witnessed a high-level US civil and military delegation visit. As officially stated, the purpose of this visit was to accelerate the projects promised under the ‘Defence Cooperation Agreement’ signed between the US and PNG in 2023.³⁸ However, the visit could again be considered a counter-offensive as it came on the heels of Beijing offering a potential security pact to PNG.³⁹ The most recent and biggest win for PNG came in Dec 2024 as Australia and PNG signed a sports diplomacy pact and another bilateral security agreement under its Comprehensive Strategic and Economic Partnership in a give-and-take manner.⁴⁰ The world’s first sports diplomacy pact with PNG will allow it to join the Australian National Rugby Team.⁴¹ Australia followed this up with a contribution towards the Royal PNG Constabulary by delivering a new police patrol boat, starting the building of new policing facilities, and providing assistance with forensics, training, and recruitment.⁴² However, some sources

claim that Australia made sure to get PNG to sign a separate agreement which ensures that if PNG were to enter a security agreement with anyone outside the 'Pacific Family' (ergo, China), it can legally withdraw the USD 384 mn investment promised under the sports pact.⁴³

Though the recent agreement suggests an exclusive security alignment with Australia and, by extension, the US bloc, it should be kept in mind that such agreements have not prevented PICs from shifting their alliances, as demonstrated by Nauru in the recent past. The offer from Beijing, if it had been successful, would have meant that PNG joined the small but increasing list of nations (like Sierra Leone, Hungary, and Pakistan)⁴⁴, balancing a unique and delicate security and diplomatic arrangement with both—the US and China. PNG has, thus, been reaping rich dividends in this new geopolitical scenario by signing major security deals. It has also managed to secure its desired foreign investment, all within a span of five years. Despite Australian claims, in terms of regional balancing, the increasing on-ground Chinese presence in PNG and the PICs might continue to have an impact on foreign policy decision-making.

Can this balance between the United States' Influence and Chinese interest be sustained?

Arguments to support the claim that such balance can be maintained over a prolonged period are drawn from the precedent set by non-aligned countries during the Cold War, of which India was a flagbearer. Countries have started selectively entering piecemeal security deals with the US and China to suit their security needs, diluting the traditional security partnerships they are part of. Hungary is one example, which is a North Atlantic Treaty Organization's member and yet has entered a security agreement with China for its internal security needs.⁴⁵ The latest security agreement between Australia and PNG is an indication of this. While Australian sources claim that PNG has signed an exclusive security deal with it, PNG's PM Marape has given a public statement that exclusivity is not a part of this deal.⁴⁶ Within the PICs, an argument for sustainable balance can also be drawn from the Solomon Islands. It is the second largest recipient of Official Development Financing (ODF) after PNG among PICs.⁴⁷ The Solomon Islands was the first to sign a security deal with

China despite resistance from the West, and yet, Australia is still the largest ODF contributor to the Solomon Islands in 2024, followed by China.⁴⁸ Similarly, it might not be unfounded to infer that many instances might occur in the future, where, despite signing security agreements, countries having traditional security ties with one bloc will make sure that diplomatic ties with another are actively maintained for the purpose of exacting maximum benefits.

On the other hand, arguments for the claim that balance cannot be maintained can be drawn from the work of the Chinese scholar Wang Fan. He has argued that due to the dependence on cyber and technology, it will be hard for any nation to maintain non-alignment.⁴⁹ Though PICs are years away from cyber and technological dependency on China, they are slowly and steadily getting dependent on China for their development goals. A 2024 Lowy Institute report showcased that China has become the second largest ODF contributor and bilateral donor to PICs, surpassing the US.⁵⁰ Not just the contributions, but China has also employed a unique strategy of issuing direct budget transfers, in place of grants and loans, to realise its strategic interest.⁵¹ Again, the Dec 2024 security pact by PNG and Australia can be quoted as an example of the end of balancing in terms of security alignment as well. Therefore, if the scholar's prediction was to come true, aligning towards one power might be the only way to survive the proxy wars. However, it would be unwise to conclude the debate this early. It will be interesting to observe the developments in the South Pacific in the next few years as the tensions between the US and China increase, especially to gauge the outcome of this balancing game and the implications of aligning or non-aligning in the new Cold War.

Opportunities for India

South Pacific has not been a region of concern or much attention for the Indian establishment, even though India has been taking on a more responsible role in the Indo-Pacific. However, New Delhi in the past has maintained cordial relations with the region mostly through humanitarian aid. To increase its engagement with the region, India launched the Forum for Indo-Pacific Island Cooperation (FIPIC) in 2014 under the Act East Policy.⁵² Though a great initiative, progress under FIPIC had been sporadic and

largely limited to developmental assistance in terms of aid. In 2023, PM Modi visited PNG for the Third FIPIC Summit, which was being conducted 10 years after the last FIPIC Summit in 2015.⁵³ The 2023 Summit also perfectly coincided with the former US Secretary of State Anothony Blinken's visit to the Pacific. The timely execution of the Third Summit points to Indian foreign policymakers' openness to interact with the South Pacific despite the distance. It was during this summit that a 12-point action plan was announced for the 14 countries in the PIC group.⁵⁴ This plan is aimed at moving beyond humanitarian assistance and focusing on collaboration broadly in medicine, energy (solar), technology (information technology assistance) and security (Maritime and cyber), infrastructure (especially development of small and medium enterprises), and culture (through yoga).⁵⁵ If the South Pacific chooses to align with the West, it will create a significant gap resulting from the PIC gradual 'Withdrawal' from China. India will have a wide range of options from security to energy, to develop ties. Interestingly, PNG's PM Marape has also indicated he is open to more engagement with India.⁵⁶ There has also been insistence by the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) leaders for more engagement with the South Pacific as part of the Indo-Pacific⁵⁷ since all QUAD members (Japan, Australia, India, and the US), except for India have well-established ties with PNG. The US and Australia have security arrangements, while Japan has a bilateral agreement. India will need to conduct a country-specific review to assess the domestic needs of the PICs and formulate solutions that are aligned with its foreign policy objectives. In case of PICs' alignment with China, India may face a major challenge in establishing a stronger foothold in the PICs when facing China in terms of the slow rate of disbursement of funds for the promised projects. As of 2022 (the most recent data available), out of the promised USD 598.0 mn, India has only spent around USD 105.0 mn, as compared to China's whopping USD 4.6 bn investment out of the promised USD 10.6 bn.⁵⁸ However, in this situation, India will still have soft power leverage to slowly and steadily work on its Forum for India–Pacific Islands Cooperation initiatives under the 12-point action plan, having been received positively by the leaders of the PICs, and India's advocacy of PICs in the G-7 and G-20 as the voice of the Global South. And finally, in case the non-alignment conditions prevail, India can still benefit from the increasing debt crisis from the BRI and mistrust among the local

population towards the Chinese. An added incentive for India to increase engagement lies in the fact that out of the 10 busiest seaports in the world, nine are in this region.⁵⁹ In conclusion, though challenges may be present in every case, the South Pacific provides India with the opportunity to take up the role of a credible leader in the Global South.

Conclusion

It is evident from the actions of both China and the US (and its allies like Australia) that the South Pacific, i.e., PICs, has become a region of increasing interest for both the US and China. From the situation in PNG, it can be concluded that the balancing act is indeed being employed by the PNG; if wielded wisely, it could reap enormous benefits for these smaller nations that have been largely ignored since WWII. However, it might be hard for these nations to sustain this balance as the pressure from global giants will be surmounting amidst the rising geopolitical tensions in the neighbouring Regional Security Complexes⁶⁰, specifically the South China Sea region. Though the developments in PNG, the case study for this article, indicated that the balancing of the US' influence and Chinese interests in the region might come to a decisive outcome very soon, it is still too early to call for an end to this debate. As for India, the emerging nations in this region may seek not only alternate partners for trade and diplomacy but also an experienced country that has previously navigated the balancing act—such as India did through the Non-Aligned Movement—to continue reaping long-term benefits.

Endnotes

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