China in the Pacific Islands

Shaping a Community of Shared Future

Liang Jiarui

Abstract: Separated by the vast Pacific Ocean, China and Pacific Island countries have been interlinked through vigorous ocean diplomacy which helps strengthen their political, economic and cultural relations. Based upon common perceptions and with new momentum generated under China's "Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)," both sides can join hands in building a community of shared future for their mutual benefits. With regard to the cultural diversity, colonial history, group identity and various legitimate concerns of Pacific Island countries, China needs to adopt a more comprehensive and pragmatic approach in order to achieve win-win cooperation.

Keywords: China; Pacific Islands; ocean diplomacy; "community of shared future."

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Since the concept of “building a community of shared future for mankind” was first introduced at the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in November 2012, Chinese scholars have conducted numerous case studies to examine its feasibility and progress. Some have considered how China can forge closer ties with the Association of South-east Asian Nations (ASEAN) so as to pave the ground for a China-ASEAN community;¹ others have analyzed the major challenges and pathways to creating both a China-Africa community and a China-Latin America community.² The Pacific Islands,³ given their political weight in global ocean governance as well as increasing geo-strategic significance for the “Belt and Road Initiative (BRI),” should not be ignored in China’s community-building efforts.

This article attempts to examine the potential of building a China-Pacific Islands community of shared future. It first introduces the enormous leverage that Pacific Island countries enjoy in international ocean diplomacy. It then elaborates on the opportunities and major challenges for China and Pacific Island countries to jointly promote building a community of shared future based on their common perceptions and intensified co-operation. It concludes by arguing that although geographically separated by the Pacific Ocean, both sides are virtually interlinked by many common perceptions and interests, and that their bilateral relations can be further deepened through enhanced ocean diplomacy.

Small Islands, Big Leverage

In traditional thinking, only a few advanced economies such as the United States, Japan, and Great Britain can be qualified as ocean powers, while by

¹See, for example, Liu Jun and Ke Yuping, “Lun Zhongguo-Dongmeng Mingyungongtongti de Goujian [On the Construction of a China-ASEAN Community of Shared Future],” *Academic Exploration*, No. 1 (2016), pp. 34–42; and Li Wen, “‘Yidaiyilu’ yu Zhongguo-Dongmeng Mingyungongtongti Jianshe [The ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ and China-ASEAN Community of Shared Future],” *Around Southeast Asia*, No. 10 (2015), pp. 9–14.

²For instance, see Wang Fan and Ling Shengli, *Community of Shared Future: China’s Global Governance Program* (Changsha: Hunan People’s Publishing House, 2017).

³From the Chinese perspective, Pacific Island countries include the 27 small countries and non-self-governing territories in South and Southwest Pacific, whose total area is about 550,000 square kilometers, with a total population below 8 million.

nearly every criterion, Pacific Island countries are deemed small, vulnerable and irrelevant in global high politics. Nevertheless, Pacific Islands have regarded themselves as “large ocean developing states.”⁴ On such international fora as the United Nations, Pacific Island countries often wield disproportionate political weight through collective ocean diplomacy; in fishery, marine resource management, climate change and sustainable development, Pacific Island countries have managed to advance their own political and economic agendas and garner worldwide support for the follow-up implementation.

Pacific Island countries have clout in global ocean governance that is disproportionate to their size.

In today's highly interdependent world, many Pacific Island countries — Fiji, Papua New Guinea, and Samoa, in particular — are increasingly looking north to strengthen ties with East Asia, despite their remoteness from the emerging global geopolitical and geo-economic center. Despite much cultural and linguistic diversity, people of the Pacific Islands demonstrate their collective identity as inhabitants on scattered small islands.

Taken as a whole, these island nations claim vast territorial waters in the South Pacific, hold a unique perspective on the relationship between man and nature, and tend to play an active role in global ocean governance. In this sense, they are large ocean nations; and ocean diplomacy has become a domain that is witnessing intensified interaction between the South Pacific and the rest of the world.

Indeed, the growing significance of ocean diplomacy is based on both the fact that an increasing number of countries are harnessing the vast potential of the oceans, and the prediction that humanity is approaching the threshold of a new era of sea-based civilization. Against this backdrop, extra-regional powers have been engaging with the South Pacific region through vigorous ocean diplomacy mainly for two reasons: tuna reserves and major sea lines of communication.⁵ Tuna reserves in the South Pacific

⁴Secretariat of the Pacific Community, *Pacific Islands: Regional Ocean Policy and Framework for Integrated Strategic Action* (Nouméa: Secretariat of the Pacific Community, 2005), p. 4.

⁵Ma Jianying, “*Haiyang Waijiao de Xingqi: Neihan, Jizhi he Qushi* [Rise of Ocean Diplomacy: Essence, Institutions, and Prospects],” *World Economics and Politics*, No. 4 (2014), pp. 56–58.

account for more than half of the world's total; about 55 percent of the world's canned tuna originates from the region. The South Pacific is also a region through which multiple shipping lanes run, connecting the Americas and Asia on the one hand, and Northern and Southern Hemispheres on the other. Located between the Pacific and Indian Oceans, the region is where the East meets the West and the North meets the South, so to speak.⁶

Blessed with marine resources and geo-strategic significance, Pacific Island countries have scaled up their efforts to conduct collective ocean diplomacy, which can be understood in the context of the operation of Oceania's chief regional organization, the Pacific Island Forum (PIF). The PIF was set up in 1971 to address inequalities and limits on political discussions that undermined the self-determination of Pacific Island countries; members of the PIF were required to have attained independence from colonial powers for admission. At the beginning, the organization aimed to promote regional development and strengthen regional integration. Over time, it has evolved into a forum of collective ocean diplomacy.⁷

According to Genevieve Quirk and Quentin Hanich, the PIF was the first regional organization focusing on ocean governance, where "regional coordination of legal claims improved cooperation within the region and increased the group's influence in their dealing with states outside their region."⁸ They cited the PIF in 1976 as a typical case:

[On the forum] PICs recognized the benefits of regional coordination and agreed to consult with one another in the establishment of their 200 nm EEZ (exclusive economic zones), harmonize fisheries policy across the region and cooperate in negotiations with external fishing states. . . PICs advocacy for regional arrangements under the law of the sea and multilateral collaboration for a regional fishing policy were

⁶For more analysis of strategic routes in the South Pacific, see Liang Jiarui, "Shixi Daguo Heyi dui Nantaipingyang Diqu de Haishang Zhanluetongdao Zhankai Zhengduo [A Tentative Analysis of Great Powers' Contest for Strategic Routes in the South Pacific]," *Theory Monthly*, No. 5 (2016), pp. 166–171.

⁷Grey Fry and Sandra Tarte, *The New Pacific Diplomacy* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 2015), p. 48.

⁸Genevieve Quirk and Quentin A. Hanich, "Ocean Diplomacy: The Pacific Island Countries' Campaign to the UN for an Ocean Sustainable Development Goal," *Asia-Pacific Journal of Ocean and Policy*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (2016), pp. 73–74.

*early diplomatic tactics to enhance their sovereign rights over marine natural resources.*⁹

Based upon the PIF mandate, Pacific Island countries have made great achievements in their ocean diplomacy, well reflected not only in their contribution to the drafting of the *United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea* (UNCLOS), but in the improvement of global ocean governance as well.

The practices of Pacific Islands countries in dealing with a wide range of marine issues are valuable inputs into the formulation of international laws of the sea; their efforts on optimizing the legislation, such as drafting the *Convention for the Protection of the Natural Resources and Environment of the South Pacific Region* and proposing pockets of the high seas enclosed by EEZs into the Convention, are widely recognized by extra-regional great powers. As a scholar correctly points out:

*[Such efforts] may be of little consequence, given the incapacity for surveillance and enforcement and lack of financial resources of the Pacific Island countries and territories that constitute the majority of parties to the agreements. Nevertheless, [these are] an important contribution to the development of rules of international law governing the high seas.*¹⁰

Pacific Island countries have contributed much to the development of international law of the sea.

In the 1970s, nearly two decades after the first conference on the law of the sea was held under the auspices of the United Nations, newly independent Pacific Island countries realized that the ongoing negotiation process would have direct bearing on their well-being, and thus began to send delegates. Ratu Mara, Fiji's founding father, was widely acclaimed for his irreplaceable

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰A.V. S. Va'ai, "The Convention for the Protection of the Natural Resources and Environment of the South Pacific Region: Its Strengths and Weaknesses," in Jon M. Dyke, Durwood Zaelke, and Grant Hewison, eds., *Freedom for the Seas in the 21st Century: Ocean Governance and Environmental Harmony* (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1993), p. 113.

contribution to the negotiations that led to the signing of the UNCLOS in 1982. Satya N. Nandan, head of the Fiji delegation to UNCLOS III, held the post of Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations and Special Representative of the Secretary-General for the Law of the Sea for ten years, right after the UNCLOS was concluded. Notably, Fiji was the first country to ratify the UNCLOS, followed by other members of the South Pacific Forum (SPF), forerunner of today's PIF.¹¹ As the result of nearly a decade of contentions, compromises, and concessions, the UNCLOS reflects the redistribution of marine resources as well as maritime rights and interests. The conclusion of the UNCLOS attested to the collective rise and large influence of the Pacific Islands and helped usher in a new international order at sea.

Moreover, Pacific Island countries have adopted a variety of measures and policies regarding ocean governance and conservation in the South Pacific that comply with and build on the provisions of the UNCLOS. As early as 1971, the first SPF session discussed the significance of a new convention on the law of the sea. In 2005, the Secretariat of the Pacific Community released the "Pacific Islands Regional Ocean Policy," stating that its "guiding principles are founded on international law, as reflected in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea."¹² One of the overarching Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) enshrined in the *United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* — "conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development (SDG14)" — has been accepted as one of the guidelines for the Pacific Islands in their pursuit of sustainable socio-economic development.

In practice, "Strategic Plan 2011–2015," adopted by the South Pacific Regional Environmental Program, states that it is of vital importance

...to promote activities which will strengthen Members' ability to engage in climate change negotiations, access international funding sources and

¹¹Qu Sheng, "Nantaipingyang Quyu Haiyang Jizhi de Yuanqi, Fazhan ji Yiyi [The Origins, Evolution, and Significance of Regional Maritime Institutions in the South Pacific]," *Pacific Journal*, No. 2 (2017), pp. 4–5.

¹²"Key Ocean Policies and Declarations," Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, January 21, 2015, <http://www.forumsec.org/pages.cfm/strategic-partnerships-coordination/pacific-oceanscape/key-ocean-policies-declarations.html>.

*meet their responsibilities under international agreements such as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.*¹³

As many have observed, “The Pacific [Islands] have an important role in seeing through the work they commenced for an Ocean SDG as the host of the UN Conference on Oceans and Seas in 2017.”¹⁴

In a similar vein, the Pacific Community, the largest scientific and technical international organization in the Pacific, has adopted “Strategic Plan 2016–2020” on protecting the global environment, for it “reflect[s] many of our members’ national development priorities, in addition to myriad global and regional frameworks and multilateral agreements.”¹⁵ The *Pacific Islands Regional Ocean Policy and Framework for Integrated Strategic Action* has also been issued to “promote the Pacific region as an ocean environment in support of sustainable development.”¹⁶

By aligning their regional policies and action plans on ocean management and conservation with the provisions of the UNCLOS, Pacific Island countries have reaped many concrete benefits. The worldwide process of implementing the UNCLOS, particularly its resources and environmental management provisions, has provided major economic opportunities for the island nations and territories in the central and southwestern Pacific regions. The general lack of land-based natural resources in most of these territories is compensated for by the abundance of fishery resources, especially various migratory species, within their EEZs. It is not surprising, therefore, that the exploitation of marine fisheries forms an important source not only of foreign exchange earnings, but also of nutrition for most of the Pacific Island population.¹⁷

¹³*Strategic Plan 2011–2015*, SPREP, 2011, p. 16, <http://www.nowpap.org/IGM/SPREP%20Strategic%20Plan%202011-2015.pdf>.

¹⁴Quirk and Hanich, “Ocean Diplomacy: The Pacific Island Countries’ Campaign to the UN for an Ocean Sustainable Development Goal,” pp. 90–91.

¹⁵*Strategic Plan 2016–2020*, Pacific Community, 2015, p. 3, <http://www.spc.int/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Strategic-Plan-2016-2020.pdf>.

¹⁶Secretariat of the Pacific Community, *Pacific Islands: Regional Ocean Policy and Framework for Integrated Strategic Action*, p. 3.

¹⁷Martin Tsamenyi, “The Institutional Framework for Regional Cooperation in Ocean and Coastal Management in the South Pacific,” *Ocean and Coastal Management*, Vol. 42, No. 6/7 (1999), pp. 465–466.

More importantly, deep seabed mining is looming in the region beyond the limits of national jurisdiction. The number of 15-year exploration contracts approved by the International Seabed Authority (ISA) under the UNCLOS has soared to an impressive 26 as of May 2017, covering 1.2 million square kilometers. The ISA is currently in the process of developing a set of rules, regulations, and procedures — the Mining Code — for eventual exploitation of the mineral resources. An increasing number of Pacific Island countries such as Fiji, Nauru, Tonga, Tuvalu and Kiribati are preparing domestic legislation for regulating their prospective activities in the region.¹⁸

For quite a long time, Pacific Island countries have been applying their unique outlook on ocean governance. As some scholars noted,

*Peoples living on islands or coastal areas before the age of rapid transportation and communications understood that the ocean's resources were finite and in need of careful attention... Today, the Pacific Islanders have begun to build a regime for the South Pacific area that builds on this tradition and introduces an approach of high environmental consciousness. The Pacific Islanders... can help us fashion traditions for the future, traditions to guide us toward sustainable living.*¹⁹

Active ocean
diplomacy has
greatly benefited
Pacific Islanders.

In many ways, the South Pacific region is projected to be a prominent leader in the world to weave its vast knowledge of ocean management into a modern, integrated approach of ocean governance. As Andie Fong Toy, Deputy Secretary-General of the PIF, commented in her speech at the Bo'ao Forum for Asia in March 2017,

[w]e (Pacific Islanders) are at the forefront of global efforts aimed at establishing the right balance between sustainably developing, managing

¹⁸Rakhyun E. Kim, "Should Deep Seabed Mining be Allowed?," *Marine Policy*, Vol. 82, No. 1 (2017), p. 134.

¹⁹Jon M. Dyke, Durwood Zaelke, and Grant Hewison, eds., *Freedom for the Seas in the 21st Century* (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1993), p. 4.

*and conserving our ocean and its resources. Getting this balance right is the key to good ocean governance and management. Sustainable oceans must therefore be integral to the new marine economy.*²⁰

Toward a China-Pacific Islands Community of Shared Future

The Pacific Ocean holds vast potential for closer bilateral cooperation between China and the Pacific Islands. As Chinese President Xi Jinping pointed out in 2014 during a group meeting with leaders of the Pacific Islands, “although China and the Pacific Islands are far away from each other, there is a natural affinity between us.”²¹ In this light, China and Pacific Island countries are moving toward a community of shared future.

Ferdinand Tönnies, a German sociologist, defines a community as a group of people that share common bonds around traditions, beliefs, or objectives. Rather than thinking of the term as a group that is loosely associated, Tönnies argues that a community is usually composed of people that actively work together to maintain their bonds and further their goals.²² China and the Pacific Islands are currently building such a community with common views toward the ocean.

For Pacific Islanders, “the ocean is more than merely a resource; it is a living being and a home for other living beings. . . . To them the land and the sea are inseparable, both dependent on and connected with each other. Their life, health spirituality, and consciousness are linked inexorably with the sea.”²³ Notably, the perception that Pacific Islanders treat the ocean

²⁰“The Pacific and the Maritime Silk Road,” *Ground Report India*, March 27, 2017, <https://groundreportindia.org/monthly/reports/2017/03/the-pacific-and-the-maritime-silk-road/>.

²¹“Xi Jinping tong Taipingyang Daoguo Lingdaoren Juxing Jitihuiwu bing Fabiao Zhuzhijianghua [Xi Jinping Meets with Pacific Islands’ Leaders and Delivers Keynote Speech],” *Xinhua News*, November 22, 2014, <http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2014-11/22/c.1113361879.htm>.

²²Ferdinand Tönnies, *Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft*, Chinese edition translated by Lin Rongyuan (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2010), p. 43.

²³Dyke, Zaelke, and Hewison, eds., *Freedom for the Seas in the 21st Century*, p. 89.

and mankind as a whole is distinctly different from that prevailing in the West. As Poka Laenui writes,

*...[E]ven the most enlightened Western institutions and organizations...presume the superiority of humankind above all nature's other components. The core of this presumption is the belief that the environment has no other purpose but to support and sustain humankind to be dominated, mastered, and controlled for that singular purpose. This presumption see[s] people as distinct, separate, and above the rest of the creatures of the world.*²⁴

Since Pacific Islanders keep a special affinity to the ocean, a large part of their value and belief systems trace its progeny to the ocean. Individuals on these islands have land and sea totems which identify their lineage, not necessarily a province or region as we know it today. Therefore, sustainable management of marine resources and the broader marine and coastal environment relies on a thorough understanding of relevant issues and processes, including culture and traditions.²⁵ The perception that the ocean and mankind are inseparable has become part of the collective identity of Pacific Islanders, which, in turn, contributes to a group identification. For, as Alexander Wendt puts it, "[c]ollective identity takes the relationship between Self and Other to its logical conclusion, identification. Identification is a cognitive process in which the Self-Other distinction becomes blurred and at the limit transcended altogether. Self is 'categorized as Other.'"²⁶

The Chinese embrace a similar perspective with Pacific Islanders that the ocean and mankind are equal components of mother nature. Peace, one-worldism, and harmony in diversity are not only characteristics of China's

Common
perceptions on the
ocean pave the
ground for future
China-Pacific Islands
community.

²⁴Poka Laenui, "An Introduction to Some Hawaiian Perspectives on the Ocean," in Dyke, Zaelke, and Hewison, eds., *Freedom for the Seas in the 21st Century*, pp. 91–94.

²⁵*Pacific Islands Regional Ocean Policy and Framework for Integrated Strategic Action*, p. 12.

²⁶Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 229.

maritime culture, but also core objectives of China's foreign policy since the Ming Dynasty when the Chinese launched their maritime expeditions to the rest of the world. Though aiming to consolidate the tribute system centered on the Middle Kingdom, Zheng He's great voyages six centuries ago helped popularize the Ming Emperor's state policy of "maintaining the Middle Kingdom's stability while pacifying the peripheries; peace should be shared among equals."²⁷

Former Chinese President Hu Jintao highlighted in a speech in 2009 that "promoting peace and harmony of the ocean is an important element of China's vision of a harmonious world of enduring peace and common prosperity."²⁸ In May 2014, President Xi Jinping also emphasized that "China remained committed to the ocean-dependent path featuring human-ocean harmony and win-win cooperation."²⁹ In December that year, Mr. Liu Jieyi, then Chinese ambassador to the United Nations, stressed in New York that "China is willing to join hands with the rest of the world to further promote the peace, security, openness, and harmony of the ocean, and strike a balance between scientific conservation and reasonable exploitation in accordance with the Convention on the Law of the Sea."³⁰

Based upon these formal commitments, China has adopted a comprehensive approach to enhance win-win cooperation with Pacific Island countries. Meanwhile, China takes full account of the interests and concerns of Pacific Islanders in their cooperation. In recent years, globalization, population growth and climate change, among other factors, have all led to overfishing, marine contamination and the loss of biodiversity, threatening

²⁷Cui Feng and Song Ninger, *Zhongguo Haiyang Shehui Fazhan Baogao* (2015) [Report on the Development of Ocean Society of China, 2015] (Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press, 2015), p. 46.

²⁸Cao Guoqiang and Cao Zhi, "Hu Jintao: Bulun Fazhandao Shenme Chengdu, *Zhongguo Yongyuan bu Chengba* [Hu Jintao: However Developed China Is, It Will Never Seek Hegemony]," China News, April 23, 2009, <http://www.chinanews.com/gn/news/2009/04-23/1660184.shtml>.

²⁹"Xi Jinping Tongzhi zai Zhonggong Zhongyangzhengzhiju Dibaci Jitixueti shi de Jianghua [Xi Jinping's Remarks at the Eighth Study Session of CPC Politburo]," Xinhua News, July 31, 2013, <http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2013-07/31/c.116762285.htm>.

³⁰"*Zhongguo Daibiao Shuo Zhongguo jiang Jinyibu Tuidong Jianshe Hexiehaiyang* [China Committed to Harmonious Development of the Oceans]," People's Daily, December 10, 2014, <http://world.people.com.cn/n/2014/1210/c157278-26182432.html>.

the ecosystem in the South Pacific; Pacific Islanders have expressed growing concerns about the future of their homeland. In this regard, China has begun to make efforts in three main areas, in order to achieve the goal of building a community of shared future with Pacific Island countries.

First of all, China is playing a bigger role in ocean governance of the South Pacific. Addressing the United Nations Ocean Conference in June 2017, Lin Shanqing, deputy administrator of China's State Oceanic Administration (SOA), advocated for a more just, reasonable, and balanced global ocean governance regime capable of promoting greater equality, mutual trust, and burden-sharing among all stakeholders.³¹ Likewise, the *Pingtian Declaration*, which was adopted during the China-Island Countries Ocean-related Ministerial Roundtable held on September 21, 2017, called on all parties to establish a blue partnership, foster cooperative mechanisms to build a blue economy, protect island countries' ecosystem, strengthen capability in preventing and mitigating disasters on islands and their surrounding waters, and develop ocean technology.³²

The content of the *Pingtian Declaration* is compatible with the ocean governance norms both at the macro- and micro-level in the South Pacific region. At the macro-level, there are norms like the *Regional Ocean Policy and Framework for Integrated Strategic Action*, the "Framework for a Pacific Oceanscape: a Catalyst for Implementation of Ocean Policy," and the "Pacific Plan." At the micro-level, norms include the *Convention for the Prohibition of Fishing with Long Drift Nets in the South Pacific*, the *Nauru Agreement Concerning Cooperation in the Management of Fisheries of Common Interest*, and the *Treaty on Fisheries between the Governments of Certain Pacific Island States and the Government of the United States of America*, among others.

Next, China is teaming up with Pacific Island countries to establish more institutionalized platforms of cooperation. The largest and most influential platform by far is the China-Pacific Island Countries Economic

³¹"Lin Shanqing Canjia Lianheguo Haiyangdahui, Jieshao Zhongguo Haiyang Guanli Jingyan [Lin Shanqing Shares Chinese Practices in Ocean Management at UN Ocean Conference]," State Ocean Administration, July 5, 2017, http://www.soa.gov.cn/xw/ztbd/ztbd_2017/lhgkxfzhy/201707/t20170705_56827.html.

³²For more details of the *Pingtian Declaration*, see "Pingtian Declaration," State Oceanic Administration, November 21, 2017, http://www.soa.gov.cn/bmzz/jgbmzz2/gjhzsgatbgs/201711/t20171121_59159.html.

Development and Cooperation Forum, initiated by the Chinese government with the aim of promoting cooperation on environmental protection, tourism, legislation, education, agriculture, fisheries and health care, with strengthening bilateral maritime cooperation being included in recent years as a major topic for discussion. In the meantime, the China-Island Countries Ocean-related Ministerial Roundtable can be institutionalized as a new forum for both sides to seek political consensus and take collective action.

As Andie Fong Toy said, "the Pacific Ocean has a very good platform for ocean management, and it needs to promote economic development and trade in the future... The Pacific Region sees the opportunities presented by the Belt and Road. We need to focus on expanding the scale and make it a reality."³³ When meeting with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi in March 2017, Dame Meg Taylor, Secretary-General of the PIF, also expressed the PIF's willingness to join efforts with China to promote bilateral exchanges and cooperation in various fields for constant and in-depth development.³⁴

China and Pacific countries are seeking to foster a "blue partnership."

Finally, China and Pacific Island countries are working together to forge a "blue partnership" by creating a blue economic passage through China, Oceania and the South Pacific. In a communique after the conclusion of the 48th PIF in September 2017, leaders of the Pacific Islands "endorsed the

Blue Pacific identity as the core driver of collective action for advancing the leaders' vision under the Framework for Pacific Regionalism."³⁵ It indicates that Pacific Island leaders have recognized the Blue Pacific as a new narrative that calls for inspired leadership and a long-term foreign policy

³³"The Pacific and the Maritime Silk Road," Ground Report India, March 27, 2017, <https://groundreportindia.org/monthly/reports/2017/03/the-pacific-and-the-maritime-silk-road/>.

³⁴"Foreign Minister Wang Yi Meets with Secretary General of the Pacific Islands Forum Dame Meg Taylor," Chinese Embassy in the Kingdom of Norway, March 22, 2017, <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/ce/ceno/eng/zyxw/t1448425.htm>.

³⁵"Forty-Eight Pacific Islands Forum Communique," Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, September 5–8, 2017, p. 3, https://www.forumsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Final_48-PIF-Communique_2017_14Sep17.pdf.

commitment to act as one “Blue Continent.” Given the shifts in the global and regional contexts, Pacific Island leaders have been determined to tap into their Blue Pacific identity to reinforce the potential of their shared stewardship of the Pacific Ocean and reaffirm the connections of Pacific peoples with their natural resources, environment, culture and livelihoods. In a word, the Blue Pacific identity has become a catalyst for deeper Pacific regionalism.

Another regional policy framework also stresses the necessity of a blue partnership by pointing out that

In pursuit of creating partnerships and promoting cooperation, Pacific Island communities will seek to maintain sovereign rights and responsibilities in managing, protecting and developing the ocean, support existing and emerging international partnerships...[as well as] partnerships with the private sector, civil society and NGOs.³⁶

It is imaginable that the blue partnership proposal can not only fulfill the aspiration of Pacific Islanders, but also enhance their Blue Pacific identity. China's offer to create a blue economic passage under its Belt and Road Initiative will generate tremendous opportunities for the entire Pacific region and make the country an indispensable pillar of the blue partnership.

Challenges Ahead for Community Building

Moving toward a China-Pacific Islands community of shared future, China is faced with multifaceted challenges in Pacific Island countries, in particular their diversity of cultures as well as the dominance of Western influence.

Oceania is home to many islands and islets, which can be divided into three main groups: Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia. Indigenous cultural heritage remains strong in the South Pacific. Therefore, the Pacific islands make up perhaps the most culturally diverse region on earth. Distinct cultures with thousands of years of history have generated unique systems of knowledge and understanding, some unknown to popular science of the world, such as those related to ocean navigation, vessel

³⁶Pacific Islands Regional Policy and Framework for Integrated Strategic Action, pp. 18–19.

construction and traditional medicines. Through the past decades, Pacific cultures have retained their persistence despite major political and economic transformations and in spite of the imposition of foreign religions, languages and education systems. As a local scholar noted, "Most of the indigenous peoples want their diverse cultures recognized and perpetuated. This means, in practice, providing for the unique need of at least a thousand distinct language and/or cultural groups."³⁷ The task is especially difficult for the Chinese who have lived in a nearly homogeneous society for most of the past two millennia.

Historically colonized by Western powers, the Pacific Islands have naturally inherited the cultural and political legacies of the West. Western culture has so far made deep inroads into lives of Pacific Islanders. Islands or island groups that remain under outside political jurisdiction are the most influenced by European or American cultural forces. For "[i]nvasive Western cultural forces take the focus away from the traditional indigenous culture and heritage of the people who inhabited these isolated islands for centuries."³⁸ It is thus reasonable to say that South Pacific cultures are mixtures of both the Western culture and indigenous traditions.

Cultural differences hinder the community building efforts of China and Pacific Islands.

The cultural differences between China and Pacific Island countries will not suddenly disappear or diminish despite their ever-closer economic engagements. With more economic exchange, different cultures "may converge on some aspects, but their idiosyncrasies will likely amplify."³⁹ In Samuel Huntington's words, "in the post-

Cold War world, culture is both a divisive and a unifying force. . . Cultural commonalities and differences shape the interests, antagonisms, and

³⁷Konai Helu-Thaman, "Cultural Democracy for Whom? A View from the Pacific Islands," University of the South Pacific, <http://www.directions.usp.ac.fj/collect/direct/index/assoc/D770083.dir/doc.pdf>.

³⁸"The Pacific Islands," World Regional Geography: People, Places and Globalization, <http://open.lib.umn.edu/worldgeography/chapter/13-1-the-pacific-islands/>.

³⁹Robert J. House *et al.*, eds., *Culture Leadership and Organization: The GLOBE Study of 62 Societies* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2004), p. 5.

associations of states.”⁴⁰ While cultural differences between China and the Pacific Islands tend to create unexpected gaps, commonalities between the West and their former Pacific colonies facilitate convergence in interests and ideology. Thus, there is still a long way for China to win “the hearts and minds of Pacific Islanders.”⁴¹

Besides, as one of the most important legacies left by colonial powers, the multiparty institution has taken roots in Pacific Island countries. A large number of political parties and groups have earned legitimacy during their countries’ struggle for independence. Yet the Pacific Islands have careened back and forth between multiparty democracy and autocracy during the transition period, leaving them vulnerable to political intrigues, ethnic conflicts, and tribal disputes.

Within the past two decades, the South Pacific has experienced increasing political instability, inter-communal violence and armed intervention. For instance, the democratic will of Fiji’s people has been overturned three times since 1987, most recently in December 2006. In another instance, from 1998 to 2003, the Solomon Islands capital Honiara and the island of Guadalcanal were periodically paralyzed by violence between indigenous Guadalcanalese and migrants from the nearby island of Malaita, due in large part to the two groups’ divergence on land ownership, exacerbated by political intervention, ultimately leading to a spiral of attacks and counter attacks. Such conflicts have exerted substantial social, economic and political costs on the states and communities involved. Several thousand civilians and security personnel have died, and tens of thousands have been displaced. As a result, tourism and foreign investment are shrinking, and the fragile economies have further contracted.⁴²

⁴⁰Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), pp. 28–29.

⁴¹Johnny Blades, “Dragon’s Touch — China’s Pacific Outreach,” Radio New Zealand, March 29, 2015, <http://www.radionz.co.nz/national/programmes/insight/audio/20172666/insight-for-29-march-2015-china-in-the-pacific>.

⁴²Chris Wilson, “Land and Conflict in Pacific Region,” Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.594.5117&rep=rep1&type=pdf>.

The political instability in Pacific Island countries may jeopardize China's economic interests and undermine its diplomatic efforts to cement close links with the Pacific community. As Beijing and Taipei intensify their rivalry for influence, sometimes through so-called "checkbook diplomacy," one of the results is endemic corruption in the targeted governments.

*Without appropriate safeguards, aid and assistance may not be directed to where it is most needed; it may find its way into the hands of local politicians, officials, or other improper beneficiaries. Serious corruption or political unrest can also occur as rival factions bid for increased untied grants in return for promises of diplomatic recognition.*⁴³

Often, Chinese enterprises and personnel are victims of local political unrest simply for their Chinese identity. For example, when riots erupted in Tonga's capital in November 2006, Chinese businesses were one of the major targets of robbery and looting.

In the 1990s, China was mainly interested in the search for fishing and seabed resources in the South Pacific.⁴⁴ However, since the beginning of the 21st century, as China encourages more competent homegrown enterprises to seek overseas opportunities, its presence and interests in the South Pacific have been expanding. Accordingly, some Western scholars believe that China has become more strategically assertive and is extending its global reach through "harmonious diplomacy." The newly announced "strategic partnership" with Pacific Island countries is also regarded as one to fit this strategy.⁴⁵ Western media are raising the alarm as China extends its footprints in the South Pacific. For example, *The Wall Street Journal* whines that

⁴³Roland Seib, "China in the South Pacific: No New Hegemon on the Horizon," *PRIF-Reports*, No. 90 (2009), p. 19.

⁴⁴Ramesh Thakur, *The South Pacific: Problems, Issues and Prospects* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), p. 22.

⁴⁵Michael O'Keefe, "The Strategic Context of the New Pacific Diplomacy," in Greg Fry and Sandra Tarte, eds., *The New Pacific Diplomacy* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 2015), pp. 126–127.

"Pacific Islands, once considered by the United States to be an 'American Lake,' are increasingly turning to China."⁴⁶

In particular, China's diplomatic activism and growing presence in the South Pacific has been perceived as a "threat" to U.S. regional supremacy. As Mohan Malik, a China watcher at the Hawaii-based Asia Pacific Center for Security Studies (APCSS) argues, "Beijing has more far-reaching interests in the Pacific. But in the short term, it wants to isolate Taiwan in the international community... In the medium and longer term, its goal is to challenge and eventually displace the United States as the guardian and protector of the Pacific."⁴⁷ Marc Lanteigne, Senior Lecturer of Massey University in New Zealand, also believes that

The U.S. dominance in the South Pacific creates a strategic obstacle for China's ocean diplomacy.

*...as China expands its foreign policy interests and strategic power further into the Pacific Ocean, a division is developing between Beijing's policies in the western Pacific... and the South Pacific where China is seeking to engage in 'soft balancing' power behavior towards America... A low-level balancing competition is also beginning to appear in the South Pacific, an area which had traditionally been the sphere of influence of the United States and its two allies in that region, Australia and New Zealand.*⁴⁸

The strategic value of the South Pacific to the United States lies in its geographic location as part of the third island chain through which a number of sea lanes run. A network of U.S. military bases and facilities in the region serves as a deterrent in the event of regional armed conflicts. Against this backdrop, the construction of the China-Oceania-South Pacific blue

⁴⁶Ben Bohane, "The U.S. is Losing Pacific Islands to China," *Wall Street Journal*, June 7, 2017, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-u-s-is-losing-the-pacific-to-china-1496853380>.

⁴⁷Bertil Lintner, "The South Pacific: China's New Frontier," in Anne-Marie Brady, ed., *Looking North, Looking South, China, Taiwan and the South Pacific* (Singapore: World Scientific, 2010), p. 10.

⁴⁸Marc Lanteigne, "Water Dragon? Power Shifts and Soft Balancing in the South Pacific," *Political Science*, Vol. 64, No. 1 (2012), pp. 21-27.

economic corridor has to proceed under the U.S. Navy's watchful eye. The U.S. strategic control over major transit pathways from Latin America to East Asia via the South Pacific will remain as a major challenge for China to achieve any real progress in opening up new shipping routes in the region.

Conclusion

When addressing his audience at the opening ceremony of the 2018 Bo'ao Forum, President Xi Jinping reaffirmed China's solemn commitment to "work with the rest of the world and make greater contributions to human progress by pursuing a peaceful development path, creating global partnerships, upholding multilateral justice, promoting global governance reforms, advocating a new type of international relations, and building a community of shared future for mankind."⁴⁹ China's efforts to build a community of shared future with Pacific Island countries are part of this long-term goal.

Indeed, proposing a community of shared future for mankind is not China's master plan for global dominance. Rather, it reflects China's vision of a world of greater peace, prosperity, and progress, a vision whose realization depends on concerted efforts toward a common objective. Facing a number of challenges, China needs to better adjust its efforts to the cultural diversity, colonial history, group identity and legitimate concerns of the Pacific Islanders, so as to expand their common values, perceptions and interests in jointly building a community of shared future.

⁴⁹"Xi Jinping Delivers Keynote Speech at the Opening Ceremony of Boao Forum for Asia 2018," Xinhua News, April 10, 2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2018-04/10/c_1122659873.htm.