



## **Geopolitical Trends in the South Pacific: Is the US or China Winning?**

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### **Abstract**

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Recent world attention has focused on the strategic geopolitical developments in the South China Sea and the Korean Peninsula. However, with China's growing assertiveness, a geopolitical tug of war between two powers, the United States and China, is also happening on the fringe of that region, Oceania. The recent policies of the Trump Administration, among them the US withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership and from the agreement with Iran, JCPOA, its vacillating North Korean policy and US threats to impose tariff barriers, as well as its skepticism about old alliances, all seem to have cast a question mark over its continued commitment to Oceania. This paper focuses on the South Pacific middle power, Australia, and on New Zealand and the South Pacific Island countries. The author analyzes some of the changing patterns of the military-strategic and economic engagements of China and the United States with Oceania.

Australia and New Zealand are trying to carefully navigate a diplomatic path between the US and China. For a century Australia and New Zealand have, since their independence, been the regional powers in the South Pacific. The present conservative Australian government continues to be strongly allied politically and militarily with the US but also looks for additional partners such as its development and strategic ASEAN partners and its old Quad partners Japan, India and South Korea. Australia and the US have recently also ventilated the idea of an Open and Free Indo Pacific. The new coalition government of Australia's smaller neighbour, New Zealand led by Labour, faces similar geopolitical choices as Australia but is still in the process of defining its foreign policy.

A greater re-engagement with the South Pacific Island countries seems to be on the cards for Australia and New Zealand to counter the growing Chinese presence there. China has become a strong ally of some of these countries, has increased its investment and aid, and is about to upset the old power balance in the South Pacific region.



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## About the Author of this Issue

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Dr. Anne-Marie Schleich has been a German diplomat since 1979. Most recently, she was the German Ambassador to New Zealand and seven Pacific Island States from 2012 to 2016. She was the German Consul-General in Melbourne, Australia from 2008 to 2012.

Dr. Schleich has also served in Singapore, Bangkok, Islamabad and London. From 1998 to 2001 she was the Deputy Head of the Asia Pacific, Africa and Latin America Department, Foreign Affairs Directorate, Office of the German Chancellor, Berlin. In 2001 she was appointed Head of the Department for International Environmental Policies at the German Foreign Office.

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## Analysis

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### 1. Security and Defence trends in Australia and New Zealand

#### 1.1 Security and Defence relations with the US

Australia and New Zealand are both aligned with the US in defence and intelligence. The two countries cooperate closely with the USA under the Five Eyes Intelligence Sharing Agreement (as well as with Canada and the UK). The origins of this alliance date back to the post WW II and cold war eras. Australia is hosting a big intelligence facility in Central Australia, so is New Zealand on the South Island. There has been a division of labour for a long time: New Zealand is gathering intelligence throughout the Pacific Island countries while Australia focuses mainly on its neighbours in South Asia and East Asia.

In the defence area, the 1951 ANZUS treaty between the US, Australia and New Zealand is the foundation for the US military presence in the Pacific Ocean. The three countries fought side by side in the various wars since WW I and WW II in Europe, the Pacific, Korea, Afghanistan and the Middle East.

Australia has always had very close US strategic and military ties and has long been the vital US ally in the Pacific. In 2014 the two countries signed a Force Posture Agreement, which paved the way for 1,250 US Marines to be permanently deployed in Darwin and for increased US aircraft rotations. As a signal of continued US commitment to the region, the number is to be slightly increased this year with a final target of 2500 Marines. In 2015 a Joint Statement on Defence Cooperation was issued outlining their future cooperation. Since 2005 they have held joint biennial military exercises. The last one in June, 2017, in Australia involved over 33,000 US and Australian military personnel. The special ties have been reaffirmed in last year's meeting between President Trump and Prime Minister Turnbull as well as at their meeting in March 2018 when Australia secured an exemption from US tariffs on steel and aluminum. The Trump Administration stuck to a previous US-Australian deal brokered by President Obama and resettled refugees into the US who were detained by the Australian government in the Pacific island country Nauru. Australia in turn conducted a highly publicized freedom-of-navigation naval exercise in the South China Sea in April 2018 contesting China's claim of sovereignty.

However, the new Australian Foreign Policy White Paper, published in November 2017, reflects its worries about a growing instability in the region due to China's increased assertiveness. It lays open Australia's dilemma: balancing Australia's interests between its major security partner, the United States, and its major economic partner, China. The alliance with the US continues to be a central pillar of Australia's security net. And Australia urges the US to remain involved in the region and claims: "The web of US alliances in the Indo-Pacific, especially with Japan, the South Korea and Australia makes an essential contribution to regional security."

The 2017 White Paper includes for the first time the Indian and the Pacific Oceans in Australia's security shield (previously only Asia Pacific without India) and promotes a "Free and Open Indo Pacific", a concept which was also voiced by US Defence Secretary Mattis in his Shangri-La Dialogue speech in Singapore in June 2018.

Australia seems to assume that the US strategic dominance in the region can no longer be taken for granted with China challenging the US position in South East Asia. The White Paper warns of growing instability in the region and calls for closer Australian ties with its regional partners Japan, India, South Korea and Indonesia. There seems to be a renaissance of the decade-old idea of the Quad, a rather loose quadrilateral defence



alliance of these four countries in the India-Pacific region as an additional security net. At a meeting in January 2018, the Japanese and Australian Prime Ministers agreed as a first step on a Visiting Forces Agreement to strengthen their military cooperation. Australia also plans to raise its defence spending from A\$ 34 billion in the next few years to to approximately A\$ 58 billion, which amounts to about 2% of its GDP

Australia also recognizes the importance of closer cooperation with the ASEAN bloc, its neighbouring region. At the Australian-ASEAN summit in Sydney in March 2018, PM Turnbull emphasized the importance of working more closely together with the 10 ASEAN countries in a time of global instability. The summit, however, did not show many results in terms of a common future strategic cooperation in the Asia Pacific region.

New Zealand has always been a more distant ally of the US. After New Zealand's ban on US nuclear warships in its waters in 1985, the military relationship between New Zealand and the US was frozen for almost 30 years.

The US-New Zealand relations improved because New Zealand played a supportive role in various international conflicts and assisted the US in the fight against terrorism after September 11, especially in Afghanistan. This rapprochement continued during the Obama administration with President Obama's so called "Rebalancing towards Asia" or "Pivot towards Asia" policy. This policy was proclaimed by the then Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, at the Pacific Island Forum in the Cook Islands in 2012. The Washington Declaration signed by the American and New Zealand defence ministers in June 2012 was the official icebreaker. The agreement provided a framework to strengthen bilateral defense ties. In the same year New Zealand ground troops took part for the first time since 1984 in the biannual US led Rim of the Pacific exercises. The reopening of their strategic cooperation culminated in the visit by a US nuclear powered naval ship to New Zealand in December 2016. Analysts, however, point out that this mainly defence oriented "Pivot towards Asia" had been focused on South East Asia, Australia, Japan and South Korea, an area which the US regarded as strategically more important than New Zealand and the South Pacific Island countries. There is one exception, though, the US Missile Defense base in the Marshall Islands in Micronesia in the South Pacific is a vital link in its strategic Pacific defence strategy since World War II. The base on the Marshall Islands has become even more important since the recent North Korean threats of launching missiles towards the US mainland.

Considering that they are both maritime countries in the Pacific, one would have assumed that it was in the best interests of New Zealand and Australia to cooperate very closely in the defence area. This cooperation is more limited than one would expect. However, account has to be taken of the different history and geography of both nations as well as their different attitudes towards defence and security issues (Michael Powles). Australia was attacked by Japan during WWI, but not New Zealand. And Australia's closest neighbour is an ASEAN country, Indonesia, and a Pacific island country, Papua New Guinea. New Zealand is much further removed from any of these countries, Australia being its biggest and closest neighbour, followed by the South Pacific island countries and the Antarctic.

The new Australian focus on the Indo-Pacific is so far not shared by New Zealand. The maritime strategies of both countries thus have a slightly different geographic focus. The main common denominator is their interest in stability at their doorsteps in the South Pacific. New Zealand's maritime strategy is primarily focused on the protection of its own vast Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and as a second priority on the South Pacific Ocean and the Antarctic. As a result, New Zealand is investing mainly on surveillance ships for its EEZ as well as ships for aid and disaster-related support for the South Pacific. Australia however, has more "combat oriented capabilities driven by needs in its northern maritime approaches" (Robert Ayson). At his Shangri-la speech PM Turnbull pointed out that his government is investing in the largest naval expansion in peacetime. In line with



Australia's new Indo-Pacific strategy, the biggest Australian military purchase was an A\$ 50 billion contract for 12 long range submarines from France with advanced US weapon systems in 2017. Australia recently also purchased a substantial amount of US military equipment.

The increase in Australian defence spending will not be matched by New Zealand as the electorate in New Zealand and the past and present governments are more concerned about the need for education, social welfare and infrastructure spending.

Both countries have been collaborating in the South Pacific on humanitarian missions with their navies and armies, most prominently in Fiji in 2016 after cyclone Winston. The new New Zealand government has vowed to refocus its foreign policy on the South Pacific Island countries. In his first speech in Australia in March this year, Foreign Minister Winston Peters has signaled to his Australian hosts: "Don't forget the Pacific" and warned of "a great power competition in the (South) Pacific" which, Peters claimed, forces the two countries to protect their interests. In a first move, New Zealand extended the assistance to Fiji with a New Zealand Navy patrol vessel and has sent in May 2018 another offshore patrol vessel to help safeguard Fiji's Exclusive Economic Zone. Australia's recent White Paper also demanded "a new approach to the South Pacific" and the government subsequently increased its aid budget to the South Pacific after previous cuts.

### **1.2 Defense relations with China**

Australia and New Zealand both have a Strategic Defence Dialogue with China. But this cooperation is limited to senior level dialogue, hosting visits of Chinese naval vessels and to humanitarian relief drills in the South Pacific. Both Australia and New Zealand respectively, have regular exchanges and exercises with the People's Liberation Army (PLA). Australia is committed to strong and constructive ties with China; but it is critical of China's actions in the South China Sea and considers it a major fault line. It recently identified China's Liberation Army as a threat to Australia's sovereignty.

Australia has been among the most fervent opponents of China's territorial claims to the South China Sea. Its White Paper underlines that Australia is committed to strong and constructive ties to China but it also states: "We encourage China to exercise its power in a way that enhances stability, reinforces international law and respects the interests of smaller countries and their right to pursue them peacefully". The Australian Navy recently conducted a freedom-of-navigation naval exercise in the South China Sea. New Zealand, being a small state with a strong trade dependence on China, has been much more cautious in its response to the South China Sea dispute.

There have also been strong rebukes by the present Australian government against alleged recent Chinese cyber warfare activities as well as against interference in Australia's internal politics.

### **1.3 Security and Defence relations: Conclusion**

The US remains the dominant defence and intelligence power in the Pacific. The US-Australia Defence Alliance, the ANZUS triangular alliance, the Five Eyes Agreement with Australia and New Zealand as well as the American alliances with Japan and South Korea continue to be the anchor of American dominated security in that part of the Pacific region. Australia is becoming more concerned not only about Chinese but also about American long-term strategic intentions and hedges its bets by refocusing on the Quad and the old ASEAN partnerships. The New Zealand government seems to focus on its historically close relationship with the South Pacific countries and has maintained a balanced approach to China. China only has a weak military cooperation with both



countries. In an overall assessment for the whole region China is “rapidly closing in on the US” according to the Lowy Institute Asia Power Index 2018.

## **2. Chinese and American economic ties with Australia and New Zealand**

To get a fuller picture, a brief analysis of the economic relations is important.

The US continues to have a very strong investment presence in Australia and New Zealand. For a long time the US has been the number one investor in Australia (A\$ 860 billion in accumulated investment, mainly in finance and insurance). China ranks only in position seven and its total investment is one-tenth that of the US. The US is only the 6th largest export country for Australia with a drop in exports to the US of almost 10% in 2016. The US is in third position in overall trade. With the US-Australian trade balance heavily in favour of the US, the Australian PM has secured an exemption from tariffs on its A \$ 400 Million aluminum and steel exports to the US.

China is Australia’s biggest trading partner. 33% of Australia’s exports went to China (A\$ 95 billion) in 2016. The conclusion of a Foreign Trade Agreement in 2015 was useful for both China and Australia, resulting in a 15% trade increase in 2016.

New Zealand’s exports quadrupled and bilateral trade has tripled to NZ\$ 24 billion in 2016. China became New Zealand’s biggest export trading partner with dairy products, especially baby milk formula and untreated logs. In fact, half of China’s dairy imports come from New Zealand. The bilateral Foreign Trade Agreement (FTA) is in the process of being upgraded. Chinese overall total investment in New Zealand, NZ\$ 5 billion, amounts to only about 2% of total foreign investment in New Zealand. The US is New Zealand’s 3<sup>rd</sup> largest trading partner. There is no US-New Zealand FTA in place. American companies have much higher overall investments in New Zealand than China (2016: NZ\$ 600 million).

We see a similar pattern in both countries: Australia and New Zealand are valuable sources of raw materials for China’s industrial production and for feeding its population. Concluding Foreign Trade Agreements with both countries had helped China to secure a pole position. It has been less interested in investing in these two countries. New Zealand was the very first country with which China had an FTA in 2008. The dependence on China of main sectors of the Australian and New Zealand economies has increased (dairy, coal and iron exports but also tourism and universities). They are highly dependent on trends in the Chinese economy and risk being subjected to Chinese import restrictions or policy changes.

Australia and New Zealand saw the withdrawal of the Trump Administration from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) as a massive setback to Pacific economic integration. However, both countries have since signed the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific-Partnership (CPTPP) with the remaining nine countries in Chile on March 9, 2018.

At the same time the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), the Chinese “counterproposal” to the TPP, is being negotiated with a number of countries including Australia and New Zealand. There are expectations that it can be finalized by the end of 2018.

Australia is reluctant to join the “Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI) of the Chinese Government. BRI is a “game changer” according to Australian Shadow Foreign Minister Penny Wong as it is using its economic power for strategic aims. There is some reservation within the present Australian Government, as it has concerns about





the security implications of China's involvement in large-scale Australian infrastructure projects. Presently, ties between Australia and China remain strained and some commentators even suggest that they are in a deep freeze". (Hugh White)

New Zealand, on the other hand, has in 2017 signed a bilateral BRI Memorandum with China and has already identified infrastructure projects in the north of New Zealand. It was also the first country to become a member of the China led "Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB).

China is making good use of the politico-economic void created by the US economic multilateral disengagement.

### **3. Ties with the South Pacific Island countries**

Australia, New Zealand and the US, and to a lesser extent France, the UK, the EU and Japan have been the traditional partners of the South Pacific Island Countries which comprise 14 independent or semi-independent states. In addition there are 22 territories administered by New Zealand, Australia, the US, France and the UK. Pacific Island countries share similar challenges such as small populations, limited resources, vulnerability to rising sea levels, lengthening droughts and increased cyclone intensity.

Development assistance has been important. Australia is by far the biggest aid donor, having contributed a total US\$ 6.8 billion since 2006, followed by China and the US (US\$ 1.89 billion respectively), Japan (US\$ 1.17 billion), New Zealand (US\$ 1.29 billion) and the EU and its individual member states appr. US\$ 1 billion from 2014 to 2020. Two-thirds of the total aid to the Pacific countries comes from Australia. New Zealand, for a country its size, has also made a considerable contribution, US\$ 1.29 billion since 2006. Both countries have strong economic, historic and cultural ties with their Pacific "hinterland". This applies especially to New Zealand, which has a large immigrant Pacific population comprising 11% of the country's total population. Both countries have long been the biggest regional donors. However, they have lost some political clout during their economic and political sanctions against the then military regime of Fiji. The international sanctions were initiated after the military coup in Fiji in 2006 and lasted until 2014.

China stepped into that vacuum and supported Fiji. It also financially helped Fiji create a new regional organisation, the Pacific Island Development Forum (PIDF) in 2013. PIDF was originally considered a rival to the Pacific Island Forum (PIF) The PIF, the foremost regional inter-governmental body, was created in 1971. Australia and New Zealand were founding members. The US and China, along with 16 other nations, are dialogue partners. In 2008 the PIF members suspended Fiji's membership because of the military coup until Fiji's democratic elections in 2014.

The USA considers the South Pacific as an important strategic area to safeguard its sea lanes in the whole of the Pacific. It has a substantial aid commitment to the Pacific which is spread over numerous programmes, the bulk of which goes to the Marshall Islands. The trade relationship with the Pacific is rather weak, altogether merely approximately \$ 29 million exports to the US (2014, over 62% of all Pacific countries exports coming from the US protectorate Marshall Islands).

China has become the second most important trading partner for the South Pacific island countries. China's real estate investment in a number of these countries has considerably increased, especially in Papua New Guinea. She has also become the third biggest donor country in this region. It is difficult to get concrete figures about China's aid but it is estimated that from 2006-2016, China's 218 projects in the region amounted to



almost US\$ 1.78 billion (Philippa Brant, Lowy Institute).

In Fiji, China already became the biggest donor, in Cook Islands, Samoa, Tonga and PNG the second biggest donor. China's aid often lacks transparency. Chinese assistance comes mainly in the form of large infrastructure projects with few or no strings attached (so called "hard aid"). Aid has mainly been given to countries that adhere to the One-China policy. 80% of China's aid now comes as concessional loans, which give an interest-free period followed by a period up to 20 years with interest rates that can be quite high (Prior to 2006 grants or interest free loans were given by China.). This can become a heavy burden for the smaller economies. Since the 1980s development assistance by Western donors had moved away from support for infrastructure projects towards sustainable cooperation projects: capacity building, poverty reduction strategies, good governance, budget assistance and climate change adaptation programmes. China has moved into the gap of financing and supplying necessary infrastructure projects.

It is also unfortunate that China is using mainly China sourced materials for its infrastructure projects. And its policy of migrating Chinese project workers to the Pacific countries has led to local unrest and considerable unease among the island communities.

Recently the Australian Minister for International Development raised the ire of China and the leaders of Pacific Island countries with her rather blunt criticism of Chinese aid to the South Pacific. She criticized the high debt burden created by unsustainable Chinese infrastructure projects. However, it was the IMF and other donor institutions, which had earlier raised concern over the sustainability of Chinese projects and the growing level of debt burden to China.

The strategic aims of China in the South Pacific seem to be an increase in political influence on these countries as they exercise their votes in the UN and other international bodies. China is also interested in access to Pacific ports for its fishing fleets and its Navy and to seabed mining. There have been reports about a potential Chinese naval base in Vanuatu, which is 1750 km of the east coast of Australia and where China is building a wharf for cruise ships. According to some observers, Fiji seems another choice for a Chinese base. This would give China important footholds in the South Pacific backyard of Australia. Australia and the US have reason to be troubled by this development as it points to a serious Chinese strategic presence in the South Pacific.

As one response to China's growing influence Australia has recently increased its aid budget to the South Pacific by A \$ 200 million. It will fund, among other projects, an undersea internet communications cable between Australia and the Solomon Islands which it prevented Chinese company Huawei from building due to security fears. French President Macron, on a visit to Australia and French New Caledonia in May 2018 echoed Australian and New Zealand concerns when he underlined that " it is important ... to preserve necessary balances " and "not to have any hegemony in the region".

#### **4. New Geopolitical Trends in the South Pacific – A Conclusion**

We see a growing divergence between strategic-military and economic power distribution in the region. There are signs of China's increasing assertiveness and of US inclination to take on fewer responsibilities in the region. The middle power Australia and its neighbour New Zealand are trying to navigate these tricky waters.

The US maintains a strong investment and intelligence presence in Australia and in New Zealand. It still has very close security and military ties with Australia, recently renewed military ties with New Zealand and has a strong military presence in the Marshall Islands. Australia, in tandem with the US, has revived the old "Free and





Open Indo Pacific” concept but is still short on specifics about it. It wants to realign itself with the old Quad partners Japan, India and South Korea and with ASEAN as a precaution against the growing Chinese influence in the region and a potential American disengagement from the region.

The withdrawal of the new US government from the TPP left a vacuum but has not prevented the other eleven TPP partners from signing the CPTPP trade pact without the US. It has also facilitated Chinese economic initiatives (RCEP, AIIB and BRI) in this region. China already is the dominant trading partner of Australia and New Zealand and will soon also be a dominant economic force in the South Pacific Island countries. The trade dependence on China is creating a political dilemma for Australia and New Zealand. In addition, domestic anti-Chinese sentiments make a coherent Australian China policy difficult.

Australia, New Zealand, the US, Japan, the EU remain big donors to the South Pacific islands, but China is increasing its aid footprint in the South Pacific. Australia and New Zealand are in danger of losing their traditional political influence in the South Pacific due to four factors: the growing activities of China, a previous cut in Australia’s development budget and previous economic and political sanctions by Australia and New Zealand towards Fiji until 2014 which the present Fijian government has not forgiven. Ambivalent positions of Australia and New Zealand regarding climate change issues have been viewed critically by the South Pacific island countries, which are seriously threatened by climate change.

Fiji and other Pacific countries have become more assertive in the last decade. There is a positive trend towards stronger cooperation among South Pacific island countries within the framework of the Pacific Island Forum and other Pacific institutions. South Pacific leaders basically welcome increased Chinese aid and investment as it helps them with infrastructure projects that the Pacific governments want or need. But it also poses a risk of political dependence and unsustainable debt for some of these island countries. In future, it might enable China to exert significant political leverage over Pacific countries, especially on international issues affecting China’s core national interests.

The South Pacific is a region where geopolitical power is being redistributed. The winner of this ongoing power game is not yet clear but the scales seem to tip in favour of a more assertive China.

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**Remarks:** Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.



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