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The People's Republic of China's Contributions to Maritime Governance in the Pacific

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LPRC Maritime Governance Objectives in the Pacific

The People's Republic of China's (PRC's) approach to Pacific maritime governance seeks to improve China's standing among regional countries, reshape the international maritime order in ways more aligned with PRC interests, and set terms favorable to PRC military and commercial actors. PRC diplomats engaging their Pacific island country (PIC) counterparts advocate building a "[China-Pacific Island Countries community with a shared future](#)." This "community" is a localized component of Beijing's broader foreign policy framework of a "[community of shared future for mankind](#)," an envisioned end state in which China plays a more active role in global affairs. The PRC believes the existing international order unfairly benefits advanced Western nations and seeks to use its expanding ties with PICs to reduce the influence of the United States and Australia. China also seeks to entice the three PICs that still formally recognize Taiwan—Palau, Tuvalu, and the Marshall Islands—to switch their allegiance to the PRC. The PRC attempts to [block Taiwan's participation in the Pacific Islands Forum](#), the region's premier platform for multilateral cooperation. Beijing has sought greater access to the Pacific in areas ranging from law enforcement to fish stocks.

PRC Key Policies and Activities

China engages in various multilateral and bilateral mechanisms that may be used to advance Pacific maritime governance objectives. Beijing maintains an extensive diplomatic network in the region, with embassies in nine PICs at the time of writing. The PRC is a dialogue partner of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) and an observer of the Pacific Islands Development Forum (PIDF). China has established a series of multilateral dialogues between itself and PICs, including the China-Pacific Island Countries Foreign Ministers' Meeting and the China-Pacific Island Countries Forum on Fishery Cooperation and Development. Senior PRC leaders, including President Xi Jinping and Foreign Minister Wang Yi, have paid multiple visits to PICs over the past decade, and China [designated a special envoy](#) to Pacific island countries in 2023.

Infrastructure projects funded through China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) could contribute to PICs' ability to enforce laws within their exclusive economic zones (EEZs). Beijing [depicts the Pacific Islands as a "southern extension" of the BRI](#), and all PICs that diplomatically recognize China have signed BRI memoranda of understanding. Although many of the region's BRI projects have been land-focused, port and shipyard ventures have been proposed in Fiji and the Solomon Islands. These projects could improve PICs' ability to station or repair maritime law enforcement (MLE) vessels.

China has spearheaded several multilateral initiatives concerning marine resource management and maritime domain awareness (MDA) with PICs. The "Guangzhou Consensus" adopted in 2021 at the First China-PICs Forum on Fisheries Cooperation and Development [vows to combat illegal, unreported, and unregulated \(IUU\) fishing and explore the formation of a "modern fishery cooperation and exchange center."](#) In 2023, [the China-PICs Center for Disaster Risk Reduction Cooperation was established](#), a facility in southern China that aims to provide PICs with disaster risk monitoring and early warning technology as well as support for post-disaster rescue operations. The PRC is also working through the PIDF [to establish the China-Pacific Countries Marine Spatial Planning and Blue Economy Cooperation Center](#).

Unique Resources the PRC Can Contribute to the Pacific

Mr. Brian Waidelich, Research Scientist with CNA's Indo-Pacific Security Affairs Program, examines China's maritime governance strategy in the Pacific, highlighting its use of infrastructure investment, law enforcement cooperation, and strategic diplomacy to expand influence while facing pushback over security concerns and illegal fishing practices.

The PRC seeks to transform itself into a “maritime great power” and has significantly invested in MDA and law enforcement capabilities. China has shown a willingness to contribute some related capabilities to international cooperation, including in the Pacific. PRC MDA capabilities include several constellations of ocean observation and meteorological satellites that could be used for climate change monitoring, environmental protection, early warning for disaster prevention, and marine navigation and safety. China reportedly leverages various technologies [to support the China-PICs Center for Disaster Risk Reduction Cooperation](#).

China has considerable MLE capability that could contribute to Pacific missions. The China Coast Guard (CCG) has grown rapidly over the past decade and is currently the world’s largest MLE fleet, with over 150 large regional and oceangoing vessels. Although China’s MLE forces have historically operated mainly near China’s coastline and in the East and South China Seas, in recent years, CCG vessels [have ventured out further](#) through their involvement in Pacific Fishing Commission patrols. As of June 2024, the CCG [has registered 26 vessels](#) in the North Pacific Fishing Commission convention area and [an additional 26](#) in that of the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission.

"China seeks to reshape Pacific maritime governance by expanding law enforcement cooperation, enhancing surveillance capabilities, and positioning itself as a key development partner in the region."

CCG missions in the Pacific could be supported by PRC police officers deployed overseas. Over the past decade, [China has sent police experts and equipment](#) to PICs to conduct operations and train local law enforcement officials. On September 11, 2024, a [groundbreaking ceremony](#) was held in southeast China’s Fujian Police College for a new training center for PIC police officers.

Key Challenges and Barriers for the PRC in the Pacific

Strategic competition with the United States and its close ally Australia will likely complicate PRC contributions to Pacific maritime governance. Washington and Canberra worry that Beijing seeks to establish military footprints on strategically important islands that would allow China to spy on allied forces during peacetime and disrupt their maneuvers during a conflict. The leaked April 2022 China-Solomon Islands security agreement—which permits Honiara to request PRC military and police assistance—[exacerbated anxieties](#) over a possible People’s Liberation Army base near Australia. Several US and Australian deals inked since with countries such as [Papua New Guinea](#) and [Tuvalu](#) demonstrate efforts to secure exclusive military use rights and to dissuade PICs from expanding security cooperation with China.

Beijing’s attempts to advance regional maritime initiatives may also be frustrated by PICs with concerns about China’s poor track record with illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing. China continues to be [ranked as the worst global offender in the IUU Fishing Risk Index](#), despite some recent [targeted policy measures by Beijing](#). IUU fishing poses a significant concern to countries [like Kiribati](#), whose economies depend heavily on revenue from tuna fishing licenses and access fees to their EEZs.

PIC leaders are fully aware of their position in US-China strategic rivalry and will be cautious to embrace any multilateral initiative that could be perceived as choosing a side. The PRC Foreign Minister’s inability in 2022 to gain consensus among PIC leaders for China’s Common Development Vision—which Micronesia’s president [warned could bring war to the region](#)—is a case in point. Nevertheless, strong demand for development resources will motivate most PICs [to accept aid from both the United States and China](#) as long as doing so does not jeopardize relations with either country.

Finally, China’s domestic issues and competing priorities in other theaters could constrain the resources that Beijing devotes to the Pacific in the years ahead. The PRC’s slowing economy and [increasing concerns about BRI projects’ repayment, performance, and reputational risks](#) may make Beijing more selective in providing PICs with technical assistance and maritime infrastructure upgrades. Growing requirements for MLE vessels to defend China’s declared interests in hotspots such as the Taiwan Strait and East and South China Seas could also limit CCG deployments in the Pacific.

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