China’s fast-growing presence in the Pacific Island countries (PICs) has triggered traditional powers’ increasing concerns about China’s military ambition in the region. In April 2018, in response to media speculation about China’s plan to build a military base in Vanuatu, Australian prime minister Malcolm Turnbull stated that ‘[w]e would view with great concern the establishment of any foreign military bases in those Pacific Island countries and neighbours of ours’. In 2019, China Sam Enterprise Group’s plan to lease the island of Tulagi in Solomon Islands (later vetoed by the Solomon Islands government) caused alarm in the United States and Australia. Drawing upon scholarly works and public documents in English and Mandarin, this research provides a brief account of China’s military engagement with PICs since 2006 and China’s perspectives on the relevance of these countries to its national security.

China–PICs military engagement

The People’s Liberation Army (PLA) uses the term ‘military and security cooperation’ for its external engagement. According to China’s Military Strategy, the first white paper of its kind released by the PLA in May 2015, this includes ‘developing all-round military-to-military relations’, ‘pushing ahead with pragmatic military cooperation’ and ‘fulfilling international responsibilities and obligations’. ‘Pragmatic military cooperation’ takes the form of dialogues, personnel training, material assistance and bilateral/multilateral joint exercises and training in both traditional and non-traditional security areas.

Regarding the Pacific, the white paper states that the PLA will ‘continue the traditional friendly military ties with their African, Latin American and Southern Pacific counterparts’. In reality, the PLA has been focusing their Pacific Island engagement on the military forces of Fiji, Papua New Guinea (PNG) and Tonga, as well as Vanuatu’s small mobile police force. PLA delegations paid 24 visits to the Pacific Islands between 2006 to 2019, more than 60 per cent of which involved PLA naval ships. Medical tours of the Peace Ark accounted for one third of PLA visits to the region, which could be perceived as an effort to build their image as a benign force dedicated to human security.

In contrast to Chinese non-military aid, which predominantly consists of concessional loans, PLA military aid to the aforementioned PICs is in the form of grants for infrastructure, uniforms, equipment and training. Examples of Chinese military aid to the PNG Defence Force (PNGDF) include the 2007 renovation of the Taurama Barrack hospital (US$500,000); a 2017 donation of 62 vehicles (including troop carriers, armoured vehicles, buses and mobile kitchen vans worth K17.5 million, or US$5.3 million); and the training of 83 PNGDF officers in China. In January 2013, visiting PLA Major General Qian Lihua pledged more military aid to Fiji. According to a Fijian government statement, this would entail ‘increased assistance in vehicles, uniforms and stationery equipment as well as training opportunities for defence personnel’. In December 2018, the PLA donated a hydrographic and surveillance vessel to the Fijian navy. Another 47 military vehicles were provided to Fiji by PLA in April 2020. In November 2008, China donated eight military trucks worth US$500,000 to Tonga. The PLA also supplied musical instruments, military uniforms and 14 military vehicles to Vanuatu’s mobile force in 2016 and 2017.

China’s activities in the Pacific

Other Chinese activities in the Pacific have also raised security concerns among traditional powers. According to China’s official reports, Chinese marine research vessels have increased their geological and geophysical survey operations in the western Pacific Ocean in recent years, such as in 2019 and 2020, triggering concerns that the collected oceanic data could be used for both scientific research and military purposes. China’s Yuanwang space-tracking vessels have been frequent visitors to the Pacific, with some analysts arguing that these vessels can support both civilian and military launches (Cordesman and Colley 2015:343). There are reports that China has deployed acoustic sensors that can monitor United States submarine movements in the Challenger Deep of the Mariana Trench and near Yap, Micronesia. Some analysts argue that the PLA is using Chinese fishing fleets operating in the Pacific for military surveillance. Speculation has also arisen that after resuming its...
In Brief 2020/22

**PICs’ relevance to China’s security**

The three island chains theory provides a lens through which to analyse PICs’ relevance to China’s military strategy. Countries in the northern Pacific (including Guam and the Northern Mariana Islands) sit along the second island chain. This 1950s United States-created theory has been an important driver of PLA Navy development. Successive PLA Navy leaders have developed different strategies to break through these island chains, including ‘coastal defence’ (1950–85), ‘offshore waters defence’ (1985–2008) and a ‘combination of offshore waters defence and open-seas protection’ (since 2008) (Du 2017:68–70). The island chains have also appeared in PLA reports, a testimony to their military relevance.

Chinese scholars have also flagged that PICs have a role to play in China’s national security strategy. Yang Zheng and Fang Xiaozhi from the PLA Nanjing Political College and the PLA University of International Relations argue that China needs to become a dominant sea power capable of breaking through the first and second island chains in order to enable military operations in more extensive sea waters (2015:101). Dr Chen Xulong, Director of the Department for International and Strategic Studies at the China Institute of International Studies, an affiliate of China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, notes that ‘the lack of supply depots for China’s ocean-going navy has become prominent. Enhancing cooperation with PICs can help solve this issue’. Rigorous censorship in China and these institutions’ affiliations with the PLA and the government could suggest that these views have some currency in the policy world.

Professor Gao Wensheng from Tianjin Normal University argues that the Pacific Islands sit astride the energy transportation route between the Pacific and China; to protect this route, China could establish ‘strategic pivot ports’ in Suva, Apia, Port Moresby and Luganville (Vanuatu) for both civilian and military uses (such as materials supply, staff rest and vessel repairs) (2017:6–7). This view is supported by Qi Huaiqiao, an associate professor at Fudan University, who suggests that in order to compete with the United States in the Western Pacific, China needs to establish port bases in Solomon Islands, Samoa and Vanuatu for commercial and military supply purposes (2019:12). It is unclear how representative these scholars’ views are.

Other scholars hold different views of China’s naval development more generally. For example, Liang Yabin, an associate professor from the Party School of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, insists that given China’s position as a continental and coastal country that always needs to devote substantial attention to land-based threats (such as those related to the instability in Central Asia), China should aim to develop limited sea power, be defensive and resort to international cooperation to address maritime challenges (2015). This suggestion, proposed five years ago, seems outdated as the PLA Navy has been modernising at a much faster pace in recent years under Xi Jinping.

Looking ahead, China’s naval modernisation is expected to continue. Breaking through the second island chain could likely be on the PLA’s future agenda. The escalation of tensions in China–United States relations will further fuel the two superpowers’ competition in the Indo-Pacific region. As such, PICs will undoubtedly receive more attention from the PLA, affecting the current regional order.

**Author notes**

Denghua Zhang is a research fellow at ANU’s Department of Pacific Affairs.

**Endnotes**

1. Few academic articles linking PICs to China’s PLA or national security were found by the author, and the tendency is for Chinese scholars to show more interest in China’s security in the Asia Pacific/Indo-Pacific than the Pacific.

**References**


