

Research Article

China's Belt and Road Initiative Implementation Maneuvers in the South Pacific Region

¹*Rezya Agnesica Helena Sihaloho, ²Tri Bagus Prabowo, ³Cahyo Pamungkas

¹National Resilience Studies, Universitas Indonesia

²ECOEN Institute

³ National Research and Innovation Agency – Indonesia

*Corresponding email: tulisanhelena@gmail.com

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Abstract

The geopolitical ascendancy of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) within the South Pacific Region has been extensively scrutinized due to its potential to both align with global development agendas and provoke sovereignty concerns among recipient nations. It is hypothesized that the BRI could either exacerbate debt dependencies or foster economic emancipation depending on the governance responses of the recipient countries. Therefore, this study seeks to analyze the strategic deployments and the consequential geopolitical ramifications of the BRI, particularly focusing on South Pacific nations. A qualitative method, utilizing literature reviews and analyses of secondary data sources, was systematically employed to extract and synthesize relevant insights. Empirical evidence from multiple South Pacific case studies reveals that these nations have the capacity to harness the initiative for economic enhancement without necessarily succumbing to compromised sovereignty. These findings illuminate the dual potential of the BRI to either ensnare recipient nations in dependency cycles or empower them through strategic economic engagement, contingent upon the negotiation dynamics and governance acumen of the recipient countries.

Keywords: Belt and Road Initiative, South Pacific Region, Geopolitical Ramifications

INTRODUCTION

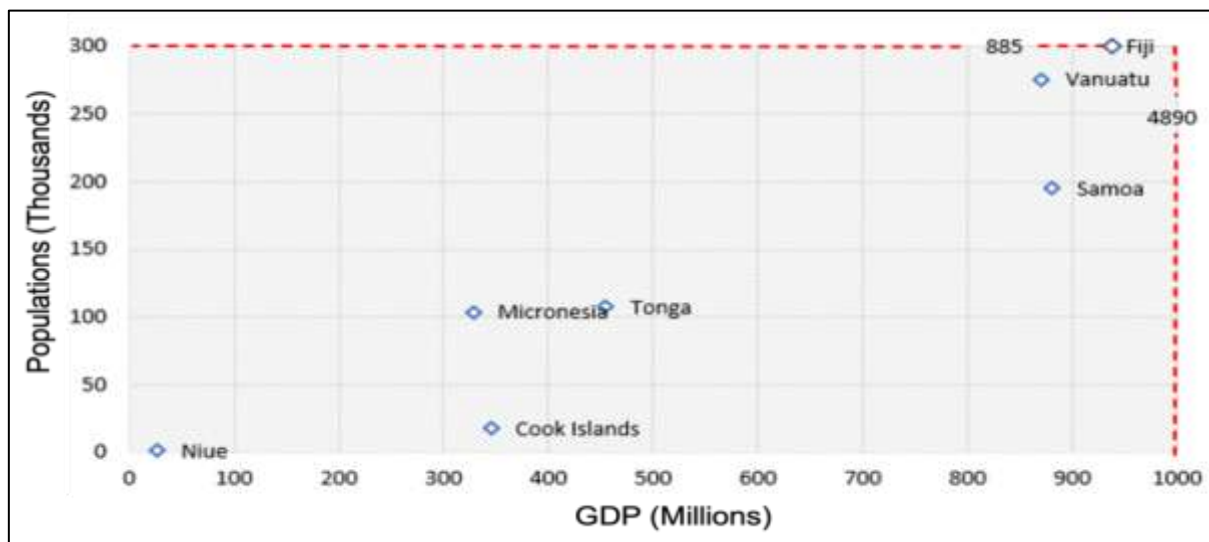
The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a cornerstone of China's foreign policy, aims to establish a global network of infrastructure projects facilitating connectivity between China and the world across land and sea routes. Since its inception in 2013, the initiative has made significant inroads in regions including Southeast Asia, South Asia, Central Asia, Eastern Europe, and the Pacific. This paper critically examines the implementation of China's BRI in the South Pacific, exploring its multifaceted strategies across economic, political, and cultural dimensions.

Research on the BRI in Pacific countries encompass diverse analytical perspectives. Notably, Park et al. (2020), from an economic viewpoint, highlighted that China employs tourism diplomacy to enhance diplomatic and trade relations with South Pacific nations. These interactions between China and the South Pacific are poised to substantially benefit the latter. Davis et al. (2019) explored Chinese tourism in the South Pacific, revealing opportunities for policymakers and local communities to engage with China and Chinese

tourism enterprises for greater local economic participation. Li (2020) addressed the strategic dimension, noting the BRI's role in reshaping international security policies and amplifying Beijing's security presence in the South Pacific, positioning China as a formidable contender against Western influence in the region.

In contrast to the previous studies in political economy, the present research endeavors to explore the multifaceted practices of the BRI in the South Pacific, employing a holistic approach that integrates analyses of economic, political, and cultural diplomacy. The efforts of China to facilitate the adoption of the BRI across the South Pacific have garnered attention from both governmental and academic circles within the region. Specifically, eight Pacific Island Countries (PICs) that maintain diplomatic ties with China—namely, the Cook Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Niue, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Tonga, and Vanuatu—have endorsed the BRI. This initiative aims to enhance connectivity between China and nations across the continents of Asia, Africa, Europe, Latin America, and the Pacific (Zheng, 2019). Prior to delving into the nuances of Chinese investments in the South Pacific, the author delineates the socio-economic conditions of the PICs in relation with China, including the Cook Islands, Fiji, the Federated States of Micronesia, Niue, Samoa, Tonga, and Vanuatu. Among these, Papua New Guinea stands out due to its significantly larger population compared to the other seven nations. Excluding Papua New Guinea, Fiji emerges as the country with the highest Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in the region, amounting to USD 4,890 million, with a populace of 885,000. Other notable nations include Vanuatu and Samoa, with respective GDPs of USD 870 million and USD 881 million (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Main Countries in the Pacific Islands in 2019



Source: Devonshire-Ellis, 2019 accessed from *China's Belt & Road Initiative in The Pacific Islands - Silk Road Briefing*.

Devonshire-Ellis (2019) posits that New Zealand and the United Kingdom, historically serving as guardians of the Pacific, have become ensnared in the strategic web of the BRI, which offers investment and economic aid to the South Pacific Region. This

approach gradually carries political ramifications, notably the garnering of support for the One China Policy. A similar dynamic unfolds in the Federated States of Micronesia, a nation traditionally underpinned by the United States. Furthermore, territories such as Guam, the Northern Mariana Islands, and Wake Island fall under the ambit of U.S. territorial claims. Through its economic overtures, China has fortified its economic and cultural diplomacy with the Federated States of Micronesia, elevating its development beyond that achieved under American influence. This indicates that alliances and economic engagements with China confer greater economic advantages than those with the United States, which has sought to extend its superpower influence in the region for political reasons since World War II.

In another instance, the Cook Islands, which are politically and economically swayed by New Zealand, witness a shift as Chinese investments and tourism supplant those from New Zealand. Residents of the Cook Islands, heavily reliant on tourism, find themselves less dependent on New Zealand and Australian investments and tourists, thanks to the surge in Chinese engagement. Notably, New Zealand is a participant in the BRI consortium, co-funding this investment drive in the Pacific. The advent of China's economic investment initiatives is inescapable, offering the development and capital necessary for the nations in this area. A stipulation of this engagement allows China fishing access in the Pacific Islands and the purchase of fish, particularly pelagic species, from regional companies. China's investment in tourism fosters the fisheries sector's growth, advantageous to both the Cook Islands and China. However, concerns persist among critics that China may gradually deplete the marine resources of the region, necessitating vigilant oversight by the government. The Cook Islands, Fiji, and Tonga stand to gain significantly if they can ensure a continuous influx of Chinese tourists by establishing more local tourist bureaus and diversifying the services available to visitors (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2020).

Chris Devonshire-Ellis (June 13, 2019) contended that, despite their self-governance, the inhabitants of the Island of Niue possess New Zealand passports, as they are de facto citizens of New Zealand. The execution of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) among China, Niue, and the Cook Islands took the New Zealand Government by surprise. Similarly, the announcement concerning China's intention to construct a deep-sea port on Penrhyn Island in the Cook Islands, alongside a 64-kilometer toll road in Niue, while enhancing the capacity of numerous docks and seaports there, was unexpected. China's financial contributions to Rarotonga, the administrative heart of the Cook Islands, amounting to several million dollars in exchange for licenses to harvest blue and yellowfin tuna for domestic consumption, further underscored the unfolding developments. Particularly startling for New Zealand was Niue's sale of tourist assets on the island, which were developed through New Zealand's grants totaling 1.4 million USD in 2018-2019, to China. Concurrently, in Fiji, Lia Haolin, the General Manager of Guangdong Silkroad Ark Investment Company, has initiated the construction of a beachfront hotel that amalgamates local Fijian and Chinese architectural styles. This venture is anticipated to bolster the local tourism and hospitality sector, generating employment opportunities for the community and catering to the influx of Chinese tourists. Moreover,

Chinese entrepreneur Shan Yuqiang, General Manager of the Fiji International Trading Company, has begun marketing Fijian cosmetic products in China, capitalizing on their natural composition and recognition in the United States.

In Micronesia, an archipelago consisting predominantly of small villages, China has secured a lucrative fishing license to export local catch. The BRI has broadened market access and presented numerous opportunities globally, especially for diminutive nations in the South Pacific, amid the adversities posed by climate change. China has played a pivotal role in fostering the development of the tourism, fishing, and agriculture sectors in Samoa, an island nation situated near American Samoa, a U.S. territory not affiliated with the BRI. The geographic proximity between the two is 164 kilometers, with entry into American Samoa necessitating a U.S. passport and accreditation.

Furthermore, China's suspension of Tonga's US\$115 million debt for five years is noteworthy. Tonga's initial borrowing from China occurred approximately a decade ago, following mass protests that inflicted considerable damage on Nuku'alofa's private and public sectors. Subsequent to Typhoon Gita's devastation, China postponed the debt repayment, exempting loan interest payments. Despite Tonga's ongoing reconstruction efforts with Chinese funding, approximately \$65 million remains outstanding. This leniency has prompted Vanuatu to seek further financial assistance from Beijing, underscoring BRI's influence. Vanuatu aims to procure grants from China for projects encompassing complex infrastructure, telecommunications, health, and education sectors.

This research endeavors to elucidate the modalities of the BRI deployment within South Pacific nations and its attendant geopolitical consequences. It specifically probes the perceptions of local governing elites, assessing whether these implementations are regarded as opportunities or threats within these recipient countries. Diverging from prior investigations that primarily concentrated on the economic ramifications, this study adopts an integrative approach that amalgamates economic, political, and cultural dimensions. This holistic analysis facilitates a more profound comprehension of the BRI's complex effects on regional geopolitics and unveils distinct insights into the interactive dynamics between China and the South Pacific countries. The subsequent sections of this paper will discuss the 'Implications of the Research', aiming to delineate how the insights gleaned contribute to an enriched scholarly discourse and inform policy formulation. By articulating the nuanced roles played by the BRI in these nations, this study advances a more nuanced appreciation of its geopolitical implications. It reveals how local conditions and international relationships dictate the trajectory of BRI projects, providing pivotal recommendations for policymakers to leverage the benefits while mitigating the inherent risks associated with substantial foreign investments. This scholarly endeavor thus offers a valuable lens through which the complex interplay of development, diplomacy, and regional strategy under the BRI can be better understood and navigated.

METHOD AND THEORY

This study employs a qualitative methodology, underpinned by a robust literature review of secondary sources, to dissect the complexities of China's BRI in the Pacific

region. The research design follows a systematic approach, beginning with the aggregation of pertinent scientific articles and social media content, which collectively illuminate the multifaceted nature of the BRI's deployment. The assembly of approximately 36 diverse sources facilitates a comprehensive discourse analysis, whereby data is meticulously coded into three thematic categories: BRI, Pacifics, and the effects of BRI. This coding structure allows for a nuanced examination of the data, aligning the subsequent analysis with the predefined research objectives.

Central to this study is the exploration of China's diplomatic theory application, a cornerstone of its One Belt, One Road (OBOR) initiative, which seeks to extend China's geostrategic reach across Asia and Africa through a network of maritime and island routes. This initiative, symbolized by the convening of a China-Pacific forum in November 2014, highlights China's commitment to fostering respect, joint development, and regional prosperity and harmony. This strategic maneuver is indicative of China's broader ambitions to enhance its geopolitical footprint while ostensibly promoting mutual development (Huning et al., 2014).

The analysis extends into the realm of diplomatic theory, positing diplomacy as a strategic extension of China's soft power. This theoretical perspective is crucial for understanding how China endeavors to influence international politics subtly yet profoundly, akin to the nuanced and complex dynamics of weather, which, while universally acknowledged, is understood in depth only by a few. The application of public diplomacy, as evidenced by China's efforts to influence foreign publics through various informational and cultural engagements, underscores the strategic use of media and cultural exchanges to solidify China's international presence (Custer et al., 2018).

China's strategic diplomacy in the Pacific Region is multifaceted, beginning with informational diplomacy. This approach involves broad-based communication in diplomatic endeavors to heighten awareness of the sender nation and convey its policies, priorities, and values to the recipient nation. China has leveraged its media network in Pacific countries to influence these nations, encountering minimal resistance due to the perceived mutual need for such media engagement. In 2018, Chinese President Xi Jinping emphasized the need to amplify China's external voice (Zhang & Watson, 2020). China's media-based informational activities in the Pacific are categorized into three distinct efforts: a) the expansion of official media, such as CCTV-9 and Radio International Broadcasting, and the operation of Xinhua's new media agency in Fiji; b) the active use of local media by Chinese diplomatic missions for publication purposes, with numerous articles published across various national newspapers addressing issues of state sovereignty, China-Pacific relations, and COVID-19 assistance; c) sponsoring Pacific journalists for exchange visits and training in China, aiming to bolster media capacity and establish cooperative relations with local Chinese journalists.

Transitioning to the cultural facet of its diplomatic endeavors, China engages in cultural diplomacy, a critical element of its soft power strategy. This involves the promotion of Chinese cultural values and practices through the establishment of Confucius Institutes (CI) and various cultural and sporting events worldwide. Despite

facing scrutiny over potential indoctrination concerns, these institutes have played a pivotal role in disseminating Chinese language and culture, thereby facilitating deeper economic and cultural ties between China and the global community (Ministry of Education PRC, 2012). Cultural diplomacy by China serves not only as a conduit for enhancing bilateral relations but also as a platform to augment China's global stature, promoting a narrative of cooperation and mutual respect. The Confucius Institutes, despite their controversies, have been instrumental in this regard, advancing China's diplomatic and foreign policy objectives and occasionally contending with the challenges posed by China's authoritarian image.

Furthermore, China's diplomatic strategy includes 'Exchange Diplomacy,' which focuses on engagement through socialization initiatives aimed at fostering the adoption of political and professional norms that align with Chinese values. This comprehensive approach encompasses government training programs, party exchanges, academic collaborations, sister city partnerships, scholarship provisions, and student exchange programs. Such initiatives underscore China's commitment to building sustainable, long-term relationships with Pacific nations, aimed at nurturing a conducive environment for mutual development and understanding (Custer et al., 2018).

In summary, the multifaceted nature of China's diplomatic engagement in the Pacific, as analyzed through a qualitative research methodology, reveals a deliberate integration of informational and cultural diplomacy strategies. These efforts are designed to not only project China's soft power but also secure its geopolitical interests through strategic economic collaborations. The synthesis of diplomatic theories with empirical observations in the journal provides a nuanced understanding of how China leverages these diplomatic tools to enhance its influence and presence in the South Pacific, illustrating the practical implications of theoretical constructs in international relations.

RESULT AND ANALYSIS

Cultural Diplomacy

On August 2, 2019, Denghua Zhang elucidated the role of public diplomacy through cultural avenues, particularly emphasizing language, in the diplomatic engagements between China and Pacific nations. The Chinese government has fostered an educational initiative, encouraging academic institutions to incorporate the languages prevalent in Pacific countries with which it maintains diplomatic ties. This initiative led to the establishment of an area studies program at Beijing Foreign Studies University (BFSU) in 2017, aimed at augmenting the comprehension of Pacific cultures among the Chinese populace. The university introduced a comprehensive four-year bachelor's degree program encompassing seven Pacific languages, including Bislama, Cook Islands Maori, Fijian, Niuean, Samoan, Tok Pisin, and Tongan. The curriculum mandates English as a foundational course, while also requiring students to select one of the Pacific languages as a secondary or tertiary foreign language. This scholarly enterprise is posited to significantly enhance the cultural diplomacy endeavors associated with China's BRI, which functions as a cornerstone of its broader foreign policy. Central to this policy is the

proliferation of linguistic capabilities through educational programs (B., Abylkassymova & Zh., Bekbauov, 2022). Recruitment campaigns targeting potential instructors in Pacific languages at Beijing Foreign Studies University (BFSU) manifest the strategic ambition to promote linguistic exchanges and learning. These efforts aim to cultivate a globally integrated community predicated on mutual understanding and to safeguard linguistic diversity. Such initiatives are meticulously aligned with the strategic imperatives of China, particularly those pertinent to the expansive scope of the BRI.

Furthermore, Samoan language instruction is also offered at Liaocheng University in Shandong, which has established a Research Center for Pacific Island Countries. Formal instruction commenced in May 2019, led by Setope So'oa'emalelagi, a lecturer with expertise in political science and teaching English as a second language. Concurrently, the Chinese Government inaugurated the Confucius Institute at the National University of Samoa in December 2018, aiming to kindle interest in Mandarin and Chinese culture among Samoan students. This collaboration between Liaocheng University and the National University of Samoa has facilitated academic exchanges focusing on language and culture, piquing Chinese students' curiosity in Samoan language and culture, perceived as novel and intriguing. The curriculum includes an introduction to Samoan culture, history, and traditions, enriched by visual aids showcasing tattoos, art, dance, and customs, thereby providing students with a tangible sense of Samoan life. Phonetics, language structure, and practical expressions form the basis of the language instruction, with the objective of fostering confident communication skills in Samoan among Chinese students. This initiative underscores the importance of cultural bridge-building between China and Samoa, enhancing students' understanding of international relations and broadening their global perspectives in alignment with their career aspirations.

However, efforts to teach Pacific languages in China encounter significant challenges, primarily due to the scarcity of instructors proficient in these languages. This issue reflects broader challenges in foreign language education in China, characterized by a shortage of qualified teachers and a need for improved teaching methodologies and resources. For instance, the lack of professional quality among English language teachers and the neglect of oral proficiency are common issues within China's English education system, which are likely extrapolated to the teaching of Pacific languages as well (Zhang, Y., 2022 & Yang, X., 2023). To mitigate this, BFSU has initiated exchange programs with the University of Auckland and the University of Hawaii and has also engaged scholars and students from Pacific Islands studying in China as language instructors. Another pressing issue is the employment prospects for graduates proficient in Pacific languages, particularly in Chinese government offices and the private sector, which are crucial for integrating these graduates into China's diplomatic, investment, and trade initiatives in the Pacific region. The development of educational centers in several Pacific countries, funded by Chinese donations, aligns with broader educational and diplomatic goals. This initiative reflects a strategic effort to enhance cultural understanding and promote economic and political engagement between China and the Pacific islands through the focused teaching and learning of Pacific languages (Zhang, D., 2021 & Zhang, D., 2022). These initiatives are part of China's wider strategy to increase its influence in the region,

which has seen significant growth since 2006, fueled by escalating geostrategic competition with traditional powers.

China's Geopolitics in the Pacific

David Morris, in a statement on March 9, 2020, highlighted that the BRI of China is frequently associated with discussions regarding Chinese influence and its perceived threats in the South Pacific region. Within this context, China and Australia emerge as significant contenders, vying for geopolitical influence, access to resources, and market dominance in the area. The pivotal question raised is whether the divergent geopolitical interests of these nations could pave the way for mutually beneficial cooperation and effective risk management strategies in the South Pacific. Concerns have been raised on several fronts, notably the potential establishment of a Chinese military base in Vanuatu, the substantial debt owed by Tonga to China—sufficient to underwrite its infrastructural developments—and the deepening economic ties between China and Papua New Guinea. Through such engagements, China aims to bolster its political sway in the Pacific, securing its trade routes and market access. In this vein, there exists an opportunity for Australia to collaborate with China in fostering sustainable development, mitigating risks, and promoting regional stability.

A specific incident underlining these geopolitical dynamics involved the Luganville Pier in Vanuatu in 2018. Rumors surfaced about China's intentions to construct a military base adjacent to the newly financed wharf by the Shanghai Construction Company, a project that received backing from both the local government and the company. The development of the new wharf was poised to catalyze economic growth on Espiritu Santo Island, known for its abundant natural resources. However, the leakage of these plans to the Australian media was interpreted as a geopolitical maneuver, intensifying fears of China's expanding influence. Another concern revolves around the narrative of economic entrapment, where the debts of Vanuatu and Tonga to China could potentially render them subordinate to Chinese interests. Zhang (2019) argued for the active participation of local governments in dialogues with China, positing that such engagement could transform the initiative into a geopolitical stabilizer that promotes development and enhances economic collaboration along crucial trade routes.

The issue of debt in Pacific countries, exemplified by Tonga and Samoa's engagement with BRI-funded projects, further illustrates the complexities of these geopolitical interactions. Dornan and Brant (2014) provided insights into the nature of these projects, detailing the different contractual arrangements. The Exim Bank of China extended loans to the Tongan government for the redevelopment of the capital's central district following the 2006 riots. However, these funds were diverted towards constructing a wharf and expanding the royal palace, reflecting the local government elite's preferences over international standards, notably bypassing Australian construction norms. Conversely, Samoa's borrowing from China was characterized by a transparent process involving comprehensive planning, consultations with development partners, and coordinated government oversight. A project committee, led by the Prime Minister and including the

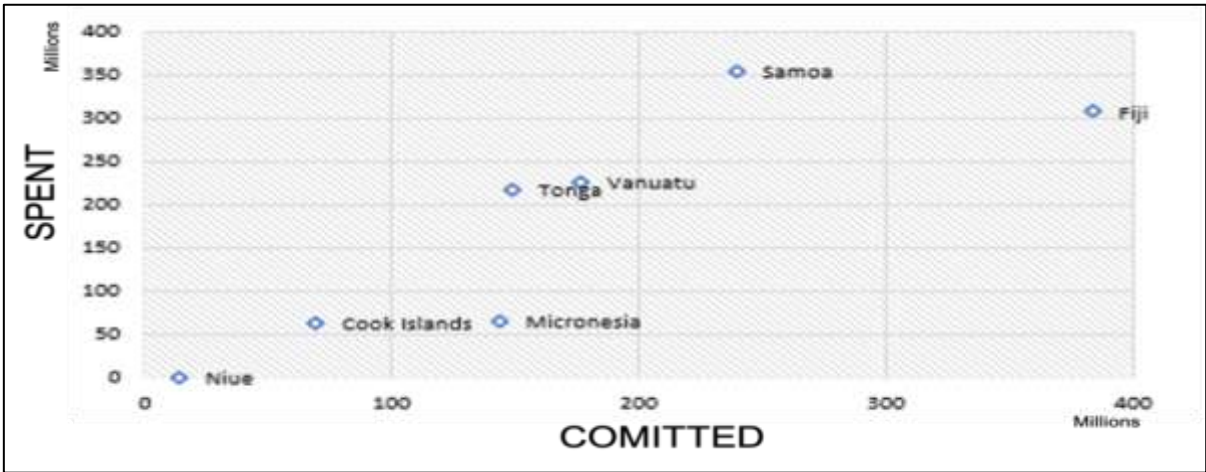
Ministry of Finance along with representatives from civil society and the national business sector, exemplified a more inclusive and standard-compliant approach to project execution. These cases underscore the nuanced and varied impacts of China's BRI in the Pacific, highlighting the critical need for local agency and international collaboration to ensure that such initiatives contribute positively to regional development and geopolitical stability.

Debt Trap

The financing mechanisms for the BRI in the Pacific region, as delineated by the author, primarily manifest in the form of grants and concessional loans bearing low interest rates, facilitated predominantly through the Export-Import Bank of China (EXIM Bank) and the Chinese Development Bank. These financial instruments serve as the cornerstone for Chinese investments within the Pacific, catalyzing various developmental projects. However, the magnitude of borrowing under the BRI scheme has escalated concerns regarding the debt sustainability of recipient nations, not only within the Pacific but across other regions as well. Such apprehensions have given rise to allegations of China engaging in 'debt trap' diplomacy, a strategic maneuver purportedly designed to extract geopolitical concessions from indebted nations by securing control over crucial infrastructure assets by Chinese state-owned enterprises, exemplified by the acquisition of stakes in strategic assets like the Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka.

Analyzing the distribution of financial flows within the Pacific, as illustrated in the provided data (Figure 2), it is evident that Fiji and Samoa emerge as the predominant beneficiaries of Chinese financial inflows. This trend underscores the multifaceted requirements of these nations across various sectors. In Fiji, the penetration of Chinese financial assistance is markedly observed through informal support mechanisms, encompassing a broad spectrum of public engagements, alongside contributions to health and cultural initiatives. This approach signifies a nuanced strategy of engagement, extending beyond the conventional confines of infrastructural development to encompass broader societal and cultural dimensions.

Figure 2. Flow of Funds in the Pacific



Source: processed by the author

Conversely, Samoa's engagement with Chinese financing is characterized by a series of formal agreements and commitments, emphasizing the development of infrastructure and human resources. These initiatives are tailored to bolster Samoa's internal welfare and socio-economic development. Such concerted efforts highlight the strategic alignment of Samoa's developmental objectives with the financial and technical support extended by China under the BRI framework. This bilateral cooperation reflects a comprehensive approach towards fostering sustainable development, enhancing human capital, and upgrading critical infrastructure, thereby contributing to the long-term prosperity and stability of Samoa within the broader geopolitical and economic landscape of the Pacific region.

Analysis of China's Geopolitical Ambition in the Pacific Region

As reported by China Daily on May 28, 2021, a significant Political Leadership Dialogue between Pacific Island Countries (PICs) and China was convened in Beijing, aiming to forge a 'consensus across the ocean' and facilitate collective advancement. This dialogue underscored China's commitment to enhancing programs for political parties within the PICs and establishing a novel platform for bilateral exchanges between the parties of the two regions. The initiative was lauded by the PICs for fostering community development within the framework of the China-Pacific BRI, as noted by Jia (2021).

Moreover, financial diplomacy emerges as a pivotal element of the integrated financial engagements between China and the PICs, aimed at constructing a coalition rooted in mutual support. This encompasses China's provision of financial aid to Pacific nations through various means, including budget support programs, debt relief measures, infrastructure investments, and humanitarian financial assistance. During the economic challenges and disruptions induced by the COVID-19 pandemic, China's role as a principal donor in the Pacific region became increasingly prominent. Its contributions were crucial in addressing setbacks, supporting the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and providing humanitarian aid, thereby enhancing the visibility and clarity of the BRI's objectives. China's engagement also includes exploring avenues to support medium- and long-term developmental plans with PICs (Zhang, 2021).

China strategically leverages aid as a fundamental mechanism to advocate for the BRI within the Pacific, signaling a continued emphasis on BRI-aligned assistance in the future. This strategy bears significant implications for PICs: firstly, China intends to utilize its aid to bolster the implementation of the BRI in the Pacific; secondly, it is anticipated that an increasing number of aid projects will be incorporated into the BRI framework. Such projects are expected to receive policy backing from various Chinese entities, including the ministries of foreign affairs, trade, the China International Development Cooperation Agency, embassies, and other pertinent organizations.

Additionally, elite-to-elite diplomacy represents a critical facet of international inter-elite engagement between China and the PICs, aimed at fostering mutual understanding and sympathy among the elites of both parties. This form of diplomacy is characterized by an array of collaborative efforts, including joint statements, joint ventures, agreements,

and elite gatherings, all designed to shape policy orientations conducive to mutual benefits (Custer et al., 2018). These engagements underscore a strategic approach to diplomacy, emphasizing high-level interactions as a means to cultivate and reinforce bilateral relations and cooperation between China and the PICs within the ambit of global diplomacy and the BRI.

Result of China's Geopolitical Ambition Perspective in BRI

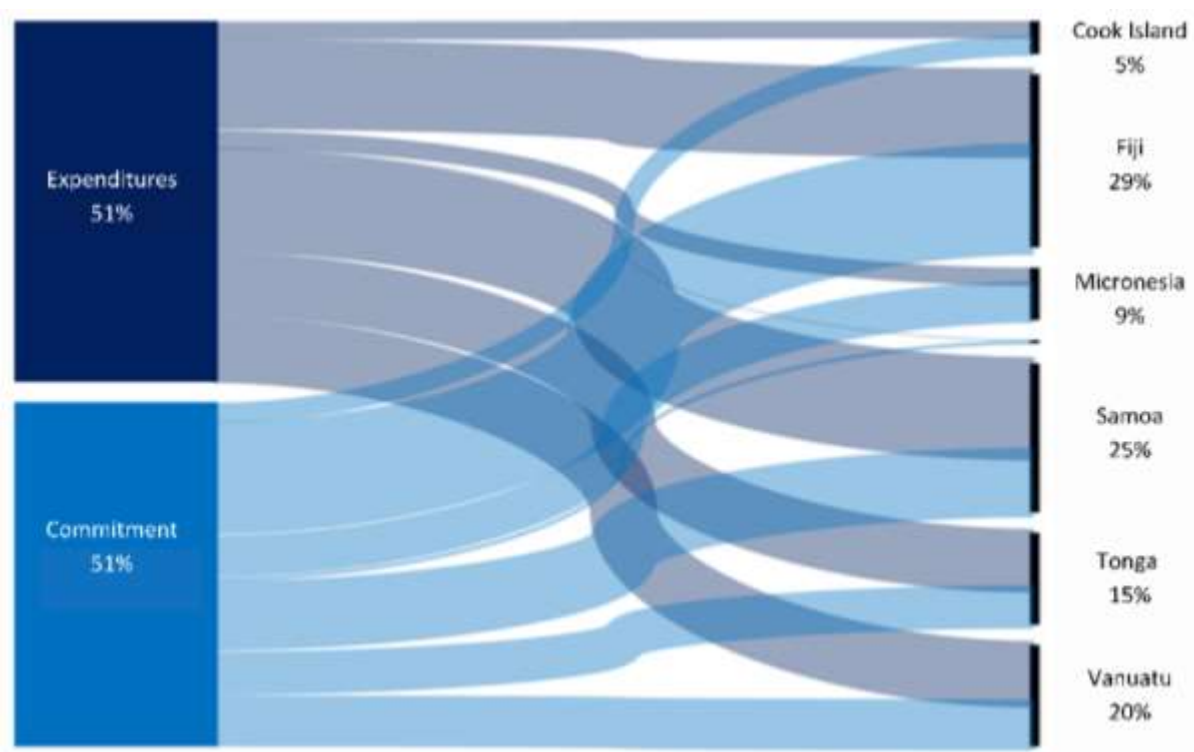
The distinction between China's financial commitments and actual expenditures in the region is critically important for understanding the nature and impact of its economic engagement. Financial commitments by China, typically earmarked for infrastructure projects, exhibit a protracted timeline for disbursement and are subject to repayment over extended periods. This scenario often results in what is termed a negative flow, wherein the initial commitments might skew the perceived magnitude of China's total contributions to the region. In essence, the commitments, while substantial, do not immediately translate into direct financial inflows but rather signify long-term financial obligations and engagements.

In contrast, actual expenditure by China provides a more accurate representation of the annual financial flows into the region. This distinction underscores the difference between pledged support and the tangible, year-on-year financial contributions that directly influence the region's economic landscape. However, a significant challenge arises in the accurate reporting and tracking of these financial flows. Unlike commitments, which are often formally announced and documented, actual expenditures can be less transparent and more challenging to quantify. The discrepancy in reporting mechanisms and the opaque nature of financial transactions further complicate efforts to discern the exact amount of funds disbursed by China in any given year.

Figure 3, as depicted, illustrates the disparity between financial commitments and expenditures by China in various Pacific Island nations, revealing a notable gap in understanding the actual economic influence exerted by China in this region. This figure highlights that commitments and expenditures are both reported at 51%, indicating a large-scale intention for investment and development from China. However, the distribution across countries varies: Fiji receives the largest portion of these funds at 29%, followed by Samoa (25%), Vanuatu (20%), Tonga (15%), and Micronesia (9%), with Cook Island receiving the smallest share at 5%. The diagram underscores the challenge in distinguishing between pledged commitments and actual financial disbursements. Commitments represent the potential financial input from China, reflecting strategic economic interests and intentions for future engagements. In contrast, expenditures reflect the immediate financial involvement and tangible economic contributions to these nations, influencing their development directly. The difficulty in clearly separating these financial flows, as suggested by the visual representation, underscores the necessity for more sophisticated and transparent mechanisms to track and report these financial activities accurately. Implementing such mechanisms would significantly enhance the clarity and reliability of data regarding China's economic presence in the Pacific Islands. This improved transparency would allow for a more detailed and informed assessment of

China's role as both a donor and an investor, providing stakeholders with better insights into the implications of these financial engagements for regional development.

Figure 3. The flow of Funds in Every Pacific Country



Source: processed by the author

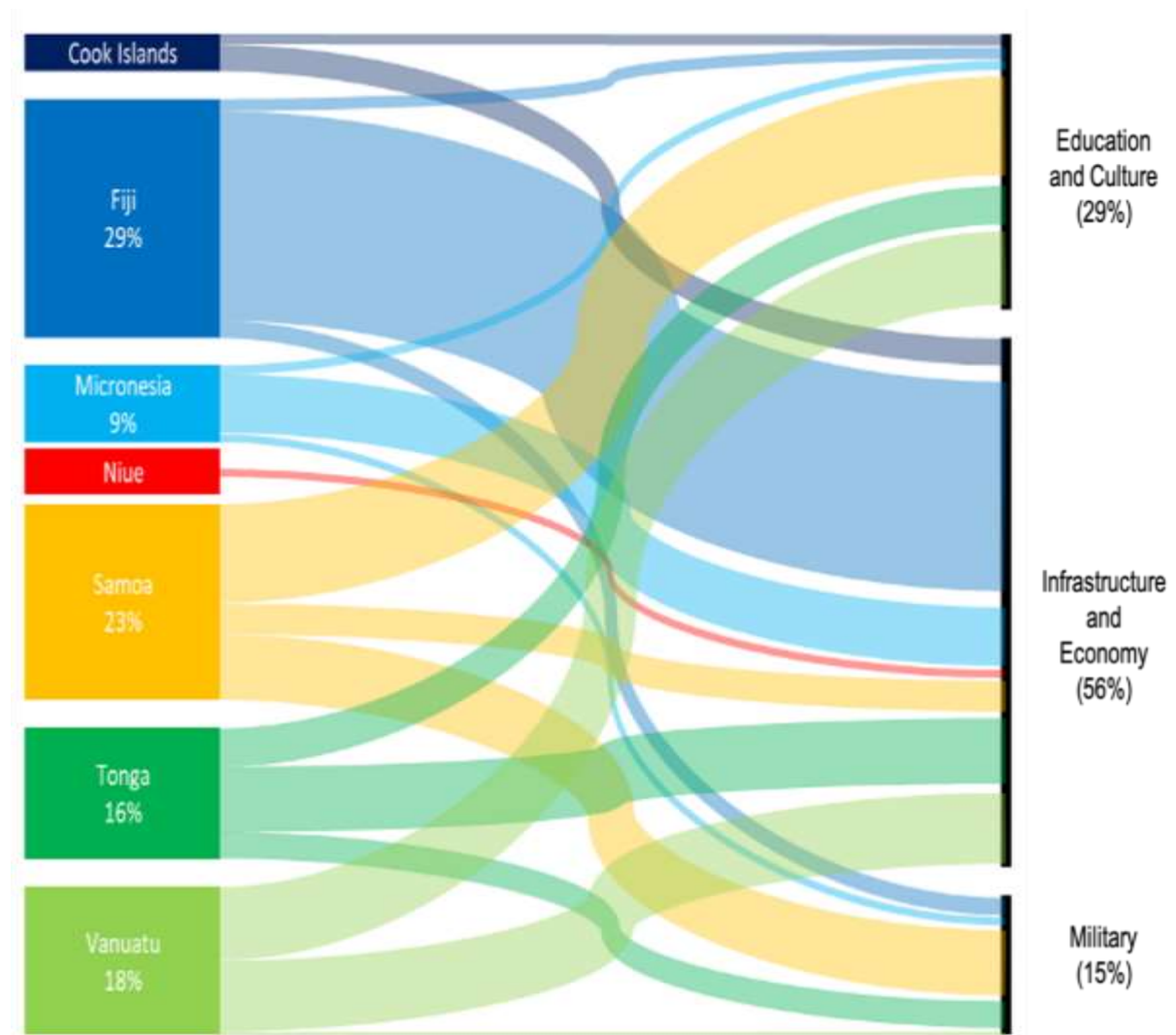
Figure 4 offers a detailed analysis of China's strategic distribution of financial flows to various Pacific Island nations. This analysis indicates a deliberate allocation pattern, which is primarily aimed at enhancing the socio-economic conditions within these countries while also advancing China's BRI objectives. The figure breaks down financial allocations to individual countries, showing significant portions directed towards Fiji (29%), Samoa (23%), Vanuatu (18%), Tonga (16%), and Micronesia (9%), with a newly noted allocation to Niue. This distribution strategy is not random but appears to be carefully calibrated to align with each nation's strategic importance and China's interests in the region. By investing predominantly in infrastructure and economic assistance, China aims to boost the development prospects of these nations, thereby enhancing its influence and establishing strong bilateral partnerships.

This focused investment in infrastructure serves as a foundation for China's soft power strategy, wherein economic development is utilized as a lever to cultivate influence and goodwill. The graph visually emphasizes the significant flows directed towards economic development sectors, highlighted by the broader streams connecting China to these countries. This investment not only aids the recipient nations but also secures China's interests in the region by embedding economic dependencies. Additionally, the figure subtly incorporates financial support for military sectors, which, while less pronounced, plays a critical role in ensuring the stability and security of the Pacific region.

This dual approach, where economic and military assistance coexist, allows China to maintain a balanced presence, fostering environments conducive to development while ensuring protection of its investments and interests.

However, the heavy financial engagement raises valid concerns about the sustainability of debt levels among these nations, indicated by the narrowing and overlap of financial flows towards the end of the visualization. The potential risk of these countries falling into a 'debt trap' is evident, where economic gains could be overshadowed by the burden of debt repayment, leading to possible military or territorial concessions as a form of debt resolution. The analysis thus calls for a nuanced approach in managing these financial flows, advocating for strategies that prioritize the development and welfare of the Pacific nations while safeguarding them against unfavorable debt outcomes. By understanding and adjusting the dynamics of economic and military assistance, these nations can leverage the benefits of foreign investment while maintaining their autonomy and financial health.

Figure 4. Allocation of Capital Across Various Sectors



Source: processed by the author

China's security paradigm is intricate, encompassing a tripartite approach of political, economic, and military tactics designed to achieve its strategic ambitions. The United States contends that China is exploiting its augmented military capabilities, sophisticated influence operations, and assertive economic maneuvers to pursue regional supremacy in the Asia-Pacific. The organization, preparation, and deployment of the Chinese military apparatus are scrupulously orchestrated to align with these strategic imperatives, with a pronounced focus on the East and South China Seas, as well as the broader Western Pacific. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) has embarked on an extensive modernization trajectory, emphasizing cyber warfare, space dominance, integrated multi-domain operations, precision strike capabilities, artificial intelligence, and the utilization of both state and proxy entities. The PLA aspires to establish unassailable control over the maritime areas up to the 'first island chain' and to expand its strategic reach into the Indian Ocean and Western Pacific realms.

This military assertiveness is paralleled by an equally strategic economic engagement in the Pacific region, as visualized in Figure 4. The diagram reflects a careful allocation of financial flows to Pacific Island nations, where economic assistance predominantly supports infrastructure and development sectors. This economic strategy not only fosters dependency and influence but also sets the stage for a more comprehensive engagement, including military aspects. By building infrastructural and economic ties through the Belt and Road Initiative, China solidifies its presence and prepares the groundwork for more entrenched military and political involvement. These dual strategies of economic investment and military enhancement exemplify China's sophisticated approach to asserting its power across the Pacific, thereby supporting its broader ambitions for regional dominance.

Employing an anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) strategy, China leverages a combination of terrestrial and aerial platforms to launch anti-ship ballistic and cruise missiles, bolstered by an extensive network of radar and satellite surveillance systems. This military strategy is underpinned by the economic engagements shown in Figure 4, where strategic investments in infrastructure potentially facilitate and support military logistics and capabilities in the region. The strategic overlap of economic and military tactics not only reinforces China's influence but also raises concerns about the sovereignty and financial autonomy of these Pacific nations, potentially leading them into a 'debt trap' scenario. This complex interplay between economic assistance, military strategy, and geopolitical ambitions highlights the multifaceted nature of China's approach to regional dominance in the Pacific.

CONCLUSION

The empirical findings from this study elucidate that the BRI, while inherently neutral, manifests disparate impacts across the Pacific nations, contingent upon the specific dynamics and engagements of the recipient countries with the initiative. This research asserts that the BRI neither intrinsically confers benefits nor imposes threats; instead, its effects are predicated on the nuanced interactions between China and the recipient countries. The initiative can precipitate adverse outcomes, such as fiscal

encumbrance and augmented dependency on China, when the recipient nations fail to meticulously evaluate the economic repercussions and strategic implications. These deleterious effects primarily emerge from a deficient understanding and assessment of the cost-benefit framework, leading to potential scenarios of debt entrapment.

This research underscores the imperative for Pacific nations to employ vigilant oversight and robust analytical frameworks to navigate the complexities of their engagements with the BRI. This approach is crucial for safeguarding sovereignty and national interests while capitalizing on the potential economic opportunities presented by the BRI. The nuanced examination of the BRI's dual role as both a development facilitator and a tool for geopolitical influence enriches the discourse on international relations and economic strategies in the context of China's expanding global influence. The study contributes significantly to the scholarly understanding of the BRI by integrating theoretical insights with empirical observations, thus offering a comprehensive analysis of the initiative's multifaceted impacts on the geopolitical and economic landscape of the Pacific region. It advocates for continued scholarly examination and policy-oriented research to effectively address the evolving challenges and opportunities posed by the BRI.

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