



**Democratisation in Oceania and its Impact
on China's Influence on the Region**

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Abstract

The People's Republic of China (PRC) is the third-largest aid donor to the South Pacific region. There are 14 Pacific Island Countries (PICs) in the region, excluding Australia and New Zealand. These countries underwent decolonisation from the 1960s to the 1990s, and the PRC began establishing diplomatic relations with them from 1975 onwards. Today, Beijing is recognised by ten PICs, while the remaining four share diplomatic ties with Taiwan. The political culture in the PICs is still evolving, and their still developing democratic tradition might provide a suitable opportunity for the PRC to amplify its growing influence in the region. This paper investigates the same by examining the democratic cultures in the region's top three recipients of Chinese aid- Papua New Guinea, Samoa and the Fiji Islands. The paper identified that certain democratic nuances in these countries, such as weak Opposition, corrupted institutions, and authoritarian executives, encourage Chinese engagement. In contrast, the strengthening of democratic institutions seem to have an inverse effect.

Keywords

Democratisation, Pacific Islands, Oceania, Chinese influence, PNG, Fiji, Samoa

Introduction

The Democracy Index 2020 by the Economist Intelligence Unit (The EIU) was released in February 2021. It noted that the region "Asia and Australasia" has made the most democratic progress since the Index's inception in 2006. (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2021) The process of democratisation has been progressing amongst the Pacific Island Countries (PICs) in the South Pacific region as well. In the last two decades, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has increased its engagement with the region through the means of diplomacy, aid and economic investments. It has become the third-largest provider of aid to the region. (Lowy Institute, 2018) Even though the PRC has become an important trading partner to the region, its engagement with the countries has not been uniform. On account of its diplomatic rivalry with the Republic of China (Taiwan), the PRC does not extend aid to the countries that recognise Taiwan. (Zhang, Leiva, & Ruwet, 2019) Even amongst its diplomatic partners, the majority of the aid has been concentrated in a few countries. The PRC is known to provide aid without political strings attached, which brings in concerns of good governance, or the lack of. The political culture in the PICs is still evolving, and their developing democratic tradition might provide a suitable opportunity for China to amplify its growing influence in the region. Thus, this paper attempts to investigate links between the PRC's engagements and the quality of democracy in the concerned countries.

The paper has relied on both primary and secondary sources and has employed a qualitative case-study approach. The primary sources include white papers, speeches and official statements available on the government websites. Secondary sources include academic papers from regional experts, articles from domestic periodicals and books. The following tools provided by international think tanks were also used to procure statistical data and global rankings on various indexes: the Lowy Institute Pacific Aid Map, the United Nations Comtrade, the International Monetary Fund, Democracy Index by the EIU, Global Freedom Scores by Freedom House and the Global Corruption Index. Limitations exist due to the inaccessibility of official data from the Chinese government, such as the China Business Yearbooks and documents from the Ministry of Commerce PRC website. In addition, the tools mentioned above were also limited in terms of recent data and detailed coverage of the countries in the region. For instance, the Pacific Aid Map for 2019 and 2020 are incomplete,

limiting our observation to 2018 data. Data on smaller PICs such as Nauru, Tuvalu, Niue and Cook Islands were unavailable on some of the above indexes. Lastly, there is limited primary and secondary data on the allocation and flow of aid within the countries.

China in Oceania

The People's Republic of China (PRC) began establishing diplomatic relations with the newly independent island countries from 1975 onwards, starting with Samoa and Fiji. Out of the fourteen PICs in the region, the PRC is recognised by ten countries that adhere to the "One China Policy". The remaining four (Tuvalu, Marshall Islands, Nauru and Palau) recognise and share diplomatic ties with Taiwan. The PRC and Taiwan vigorously competed for diplomatic recognition from the PICs during the 1990s by offering economic investments and development aid, infamously known as the practice of "chequebook diplomacy". However, this aggressive competition slowed down after the Kuomintang government came into power in Taiwan in 2008 with President Ma Ying-Jeou, who adopted a conciliatory approach towards the PRC. (Fifita & Hanson, 2011)

The PRC has been engaging with the PICs on multilateral platforms both regionally and internationally. In 1990, the PRC became a *Post Forum Dialogue Partner* of the *Pacific Islands Forum (PIF)*, the most important political organisation in the region. In October 2000, China announced the establishment of the *China-Pacific Islands Forum Cooperation Fund* and the PIF Trade Office in China to boost regional cooperation at the 31st Pacific Island Forum in Kiribati. (Yang, 2000) In April 2006, China held the first *China-Pacific Island Countries Economic Development and Cooperation Forum* in Fiji, where they signed the "Action Plan of Economic Development and Cooperation" with 8 Pacific Island countries. The then Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao also announced to make available RMB 3 billion yuan (US\$376 billion) of preferential loans, establish a special fund to promote Chinese investment, promised zero-tariff treatment of exports to China and cancellation of debts maturing in 2005. (Wen, 2006) The second *China-Pacific Island Countries Economic Development and Cooperation Forum* was held in Guangzhou, China, in November 2013. Former Vice-Premier Wang Yang announced US\$1 billion in concessional loans, another US\$1 billion in non-concessional loans through China Development Bank (CDB), promised zero-tariff treatment for 95% of exports from the

region and also announced scholarship programmes for Pacific students, amongst other things. (Dornan, Zhang, & Brant, 2013) The third Forum was held in Apia, Samoa, on 21 October 2019. The Chinese Vice-Premier Hu Chunhua expressed China's intention to increase regional cooperation through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and expand trade and investments through sectors like agriculture, forestry and fishery, energy and resources as well as tourism. (Huaxia, 2019) All ten partners of the PRC have signed up for the BRI.

China supports the countries across the region through bilateral aid programmes and has also established aid offices in some countries, like Tonga, to coordinate economic activities. Chinese aid to the region comes through its financial institutions such as the China Exim Bank, China Development Bank, the Agricultural Development Bank of China, and so on. (Brant, 2015) According to the latest data provided by the Lowy Institute Pacific Aid Map, China was the third-largest aid donor to the region after Australia and New Zealand in 2018. Of the US\$241.08 million provided by China, the top three recipients were Papua New Guinea, Samoa and Fiji Islands, who received 42.8 per cent, 17.2 per cent and 15.67 per cent of the total aid respectively. The aid was provided in the form of grants and loans. Concessional loans worth US\$1.47 billion made up 67.5 per cent of the aid between 2011 and 2018 and were focused on large-scale infrastructure projects. On the other hand, Chinese grant aid was directed towards infrastructures like government buildings and schools. (Lowy Institute, 2018) The PRC has trade relations with all the countries in the region, regardless of diplomatic affiliations. China is, in fact, the largest trading partner with the 14 PICs, surpassing the traditional regional powers Australia and New Zealand. However, researchers have found that the PRC enjoys a huge trade surplus with the PICs as the PRC exports far more than it imports from the PICs. In 2015, China's trade surplus against the PICs peaked at US\$4.82 billion but later came down to US\$1.87 billion by 2017. (Zhang, 2020) According to the latest data on trade in goods provided by the United Nations Commodity Trade Statistics Database (UN Comtrade), China is among the top five export partners for seven out of the twelve listed PICs. China is also among the top five import partners for all the twelve listed countries. (UN Comtrade, 2019)

Following the establishment of the *China–Pacific Island Countries Economic Development and Cooperation Forum* in 2006, the Pacific Islands have had several high-level visits from Chinese Government Officials on various occasions. Of the 25 visits between 2005-2018, the highest-

level visits have been President Xi Jinping's state visits to Fiji in 2014 and to Papua New Guinea in 2018. The Pacific leaders have also been invited to China. They made over 60 visits to China between 2005-2018, often to attend various multilateral events held in China such as the 2008 Olympic Games, the 2010 World Expo, the APEC annual conference in 2014, the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation summit in 2017, and so on. (Zhou, 2021) President Xi Jinping also met the leaders of the eight partner PICs during the APEC Summit in Port Moresby in November 2018 and proposed the continued pursuance of mutual cooperation and development. (Liangyu, 2018) The number of PRC's diplomatic partners increased in September 2019 when the Solomon Islands, followed by Kiribati, switched to the PRC from Taiwan. China has been extending support to its PIC partners to combat the COVID-19 pandemic in the form of economic aid and donating medical supplies amounting to US\$1.9 million. (Embassy of The People's Republic of China in The Republic of Fiji, 2020) The Chinese government also held video conferences with medical experts in March 2020 with the PICs to share information on dealing with COVID-19. (Embassy of The People's Republic of China in The Republic of Fiji, 2020)

Democratic Nuances in Pacific Island Countries

The PRC provides aid only to the countries that diplomatically recognise Beijing. (Zhang, Leiva, & Ruwet, 2019) A feature that makes Chinese aid attractive to recipients is the absence of political conditions attached. This is in contrast to Western donors, including the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Development Assistance Committee donors, who often demand conditions to promote democracy, good governance, human rights, civil society development, and so on. (Zhanzg J., 2015) The no-strings-attached approach aligns with China's broader foreign policy of non-interference in sovereign countries' internal affairs. China only demands adherence to the 'One China policy' from its partners and expects support for its positions at the UN. (Dornan & Brant, 2014) Western observers have often been concerned that the lack of political conditions attached to Chinese aid may be counterproductive within the countries' domestic systems and promote undemocratic trends. (Seib, 2009) The following paragraphs aim to examine the plausibility of these concerns by analysing the relations between the flow of Chinese aid and the democratic cultures in the top three recipients of Chinese aid amongst the PICs: Papua New Guinea, Samoa and Fiji.

Papua New Guinea (PNG) is the largest PIC in terms of land area (178,656 square miles) and population (approximately 8.78 million). It is also the biggest economy with a nominal GDP of US\$23.59 billion in 2020, and the country has abundant natural resources. PNG ranked 70 out of 165 independent states on the *Democracy Index 2020*. PNG was labelled as a "flawed democracy", indicating weaknesses in aspects of governance and underdeveloped political culture (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2021). According to the *Global Freedom Scores* by Freedom House, PNG scored 62/100, indicating that the country is "partly free". The country report provided by the same revealed that though democratic elections are frequently held, irregularities are recorded along with violence. It also highlighted the instability of party allegiances and how only two governments-Michael Somare (2002 to 2007) and Peter O'Neill (2011 to 2019)-have survived full terms since 1975. (Freedom House, 2021) There are 45 officially registered political parties in PNG and no party has a chance to win a majority. Hence, governments usually form coalitions of more than five parties. However, these coalitions are often mobilised around personalities, rather than policies, which add to parliamentary instability. Measures have been taken to combat this instability, such as extending the period of immunity from votes of no-confidence to eighteen months in 1991 (Baker, 2005). The *Organic Law on the Integrity of Political Parties and Candidates* (OLIPPAC) was also passed in 2001 to stop "party-hopping". These measures, however, have not been very successful and have instead been counterproductive as huge coalitions, as seen under both Somare and Peter O'Neill, led to the undermining of the legislature. Upon expiration of the 18 months grace period, Prime Ministers often adjourned the Parliament for months on end to prevent motions of no-confidence from being passed. PNG ranked 141 out of 198 countries on the *Global Corruption Index*, indicating a high level of corruption. (Index, 2020) The former Prime Minister Peter O'Neill was arrested in 2020 because of corruption activities involving the US\$14 million purchase of two generators without parliamentary approval. (Davidson, 2020) During his term in office, O'Neill was also involved in a long-running anti-corruption taskforce inquiry, which he disbanded and even fired the senior officials involved. (Davidson, 2014) Thus, the domination of the executive in PNG politics and the Opposition's weakness threatens parliamentary democracy.

The **Independent State of Samoa** has a total land area of 1,093.0552 square miles and a population of 202,506. It has a nominal GDP of US\$844 million (2019), and its economy is reliant on agriculture exports, tourism and remittances. Samoa was not included in the *Democracy Index 2020*. On the *Global Freedom Scores*, it scored 81 out of 100 and was termed as a “free” country with a democratic political system that regularly conducts elections. However, the odd feature of Samoa’s democracy is that only one political party, the Human Rights Protection Party (HRPP), was in power for over three decades. In the 2016 election, HRPP won 35 out of the 50 seats. Thirteen seats were won by independent candidates, out of which twelve joined the HRPP after the elections. The remaining one joined the opposition Tautua Samoa Party (TSP), increasing their number to 3. Former Prime Minister Tuila'epa of the HRPP had been in office for 22 years since 1998. (Freedom House, 2020) Although Samoa has often been regarded as a beacon of democracy and stability in the region, observers have revealed the hidden nuances of the Samoan system. One such notable work is the chapter titled "One Party State: The Samoan Experience," written by Samoan Ambassador Afamasaga Toleafoa in the book *Politics, Development and Security in Oceania (2013)*. In his piece, Toleafoa revealed how the long domination of HRPP had undermined various democratic institutions of the country, stripping them of their independent powers. These include the office of Controller and Chief Auditor and the Electoral Commission, which are now directly under the control of the cabinet through re-engineering of the Samoan Constitution over the years. Media was also extensively monitored as the government owned the public media services, which allowed them to control public opinion by influencing the dissemination of information. All these factors allowed for the concentration of unprecedented amounts of power in the hands of the executive. Toleafoa went to the extent of describing the Samoan Parliament to be as useful as a “rubber stamp”. He questioned the credibility of Samoan democracy by noting that no party should be able to hold power for such a long period in a functioning democracy (Toleafoa, 2013) Samoa ranks 64 out of 198 countries on the Global Corruption Index, indicating medium levels of corruption.

The **Republic of Fiji** is the second-largest PIC both in terms of the land area of (7,078 square miles) and population (896,445), with nominal GDP of US\$4.38 billion as of 2020. On the *Democracy Index 2020*, Fiji ranked 83 out of 165 countries and was labelled as a "hybrid regime", indicating serious weaknesses in political culture, government and political

participation, compromised rule of law, low freedom of media, and weakness of the opposition. Fiji scored 60/100 on the *Global Freedom Scores* and was termed as "partly free". The country report reveals that although democratic elections have been regularly held in recent years, the ruling party "FijiFirst" dominates over the opposition. The judiciary is undermined, and the military plays a significant role in the country despite constitutional guarantees for it to be apolitical. (Freedom House, 2020) Fiji ranks 49 out of 198 countries on the *Global Corruption Index*, indicating low levels of corruption. However, there have been reports that corruption charges by the Fiji Independent Commission Against Corruption (FICAC) are often politically motivated and are used to target the Opposition. The socio-political landscape of Fiji has always been marred by the conflict between indigenous Fijians and ethnic Indians. Three out of the four military coups since independence have been attributed to ethnic tensions. The last coup in 2006, led by military leader Commodore Frank Bainimarama, aimed to oust the elected government of Laisenia Qarase on the grounds of corruption and bias against Indian Fijians. (BBC, 2014) Commodore Bainimarama then took on the title and responsibilities of the Prime Minister. When the coup happened, he was labelled as a dictator by Australia and New Zealand, which imposed sanctions on Fiji to pressure a return to restore democracy. Fiji's memberships to the Commonwealth and Pacific Islands Forum were also suspended from 2009 till 2014. (BBC, 2015)

Implications of democracy on China's influence

On examining the democratic cultures of the top recipients of Chinese aid in the region, it is clear that China's engagement with countries stands true to its principle of non-interference in domestic affairs. When the military coup happened in Fiji in 2006, Australia and New Zealand were the first to condemn Fiji's 'undemocratic behaviour'. They mobilised bilateral and multilateral sanctions to punish the military regime. This led Fiji to re-emphasise its 2000 'Look North Policy', which eventually deepened Fiji-China relations as the policy looked towards non-traditional partners for economic support. Since then, Chinese aid to Fiji increased by at least 4 per cent every year in the initial years following 2006. (Salem, 2020) The case of Fiji reveals how undemocratic circumstances can be an opening for China to amplify its influence in a country. However, there has been a shift in China-Fiji engagement since the

latter began conducting democratic elections in 2014 after bringing out a new constitution in 2013 that gave equal rights to Indian Fijians and ethnic Fijians.

Two elections have been held so far – in 2014 and 2018. Restrictions on freedom of media and corruption allegations against the Opposition party were noted during the elections. According to data from the Pacific Aid Map, the percentage of Fiji's share in China's total aid to the region started declining from 2013. In 2012, Fiji received 38.63 per cent of China's total aid. This figure decreased to 31.81 per cent in 2013 and has kept decreasing each year. In 2016, it decreased to 11.04 per cent and further decreased to 9.9 per cent in 2017. The decreasing trend of Fiji's share of Chinese aid coincides with the improving process of democratisation between 2013 and 2017. However, although it increased again in 2018 to 15.67 per cent, the lack of data beyond 2018 limits further analysis.

The political systems of PNG and Samoa have enabled rampant corruption and accumulation of unprecedented power in the hands of the executives. Both countries owe considerable debts to China. PNG owed almost 24 per cent of the country's total external debt of approximately US\$402 million to China in 2018 (Human Rights Watch, 2020); Samoa owes about 40 per cent of its total external debt of around US\$160 million to China. PNG's former Prime Minister Peter O'Neill and Samoa's former Prime Minister Tuila'epa pursued closer relationships with China. These two leaders represented governments whose democratic credentials could be questioned. They wielded almost autocratic powers in their positions, undermining their respective democracies. (Donge, 2015) Coincidentally, both leaders shared favourable relations with Beijing. In the case of Samoa, the 2021 elections featured an intense debate on the country's stance towards China on account of its debt. The main point of contention was a proposed construction of a port in Vaiusu Bay which China would fund. The Asian Development Bank (ADB) warned against the construction of the port as it would cost around US\$300 million. When the ABD declined to support the project, former Prime Minister Tuilaepa approached China, who offered to help construct the port for just US\$100 million. (Reuters, 2021) Tuilaepa was keen on the project stating that it would provide employment opportunities and boost trade and tourism. However, the opposition party, Fa'atuatua i le Atua Samoa ua Tasi (FAST), led by Fiame Naomi Mataafa, opposed the project stating in an interview with Reuters that the plan was too excessive for the small country. The Vaiusu port is

also close to the main Apia port in Matutu, which had been expanded with Japanese aid. Thus, the Vaiusu port was not necessary and became a pressing issue for the voters. (Reuters, 2021) After almost three months of constitutional crisis, which began when the former Prime Minister refused to accept defeat, Samoa welcomed its first female Prime Minister, Fiame Naomi Mataafa, in July after the country's Court of Appeal affirmed that her government was legal. (Reuters, 2021) Under the new leadership, the Samoan government has shelved the China-funded Vaiusu Port to focus on other pressing domestic issues that the country faces. (RNZ Pacific, 2021)

In PNG as well, the change in government in 2019 has led to a slight shift in engagement with China. Prime Minister James Marape came to power in May 2019 with the slogan "take back PNG" after the former Prime Minister stepped down. The focus of his slogan was, amongst other things, to ensure that the local people received a fair share of the benefits from PNG's resource sector. In an address to the Lowy Institute, Marape also expressed that foreign companies which profited "unfairly from our natural resources" or did not adhere to regulations would feel the full force of PNG law. (Lowy Institute, 2019) In April 2020, the PNG cabinet decided not to renew the mining lease at Porgera gold mine to Barrick Niugini Limited's (BNL), held jointly by Canada's Barrick Gold (47.5 per cent) and China's Zijin Mining (47.5 per cent). (Burton & Banks, 2020) The Prime Minister then announced that the Porgera would instead transition to national ownership. In response to this, the Zijin Chairman Chen Jinghe wrote a letter to PM Marape warning that there may be a "significant negative impact on the bilateral relations between China and PNG." (ABC News, 2020) The operation of the mine was soon suspended in April 2020 until an agreement was reached in April 2021, which declared that Porgera would be held in a new joint venture, owned 51% by PNG stakeholders and 49% by Barrick Niugini Limited (BNL). (Webb, 2021)

The above cases reveal how the dethronement of pro-China leaders brought forth changes in government priorities. In Samoa and PNG, the removal of former Prime Ministers Peter O'Neill and Tuilaepa has given way to policies and stances which favour the development of the domestic economy and the welfare of the local people. The case of Samoa can even be considered as a potential rejuvenation of democracy under a new leadership. The current government has made it clear that though the country will maintain good relations with China,

they will not be favouring unnecessary ventures in a quest for funds but would focus instead on the practical needs of the people (Reuters, 2021). In PNG, the new government is broadly attempting to mend its institutions and eliminate the rampant corruption that thrived under the previous government. (Post-Courier, 2021) Although this does not necessarily imply democratic transformation, improvement in government machinery can lead to greater accountability and transparency and increase the quality of governance. These factors can empower the government to take bold stances in the interest of its people in both domestic and international concerns.

Conclusion

This paper explored the impact of democratisation in PICs on China's influence in the region by examining the democratic cultures of the top three recipients of Chinese aid in the region. Analysis of past events and recent trends seem to reveal that undemocratic conditions paired with corrupted institutions provide favourable conditions for Chinese activities. The lack of strong democratic institutions provides an opportunity for China to pursue its interests without scrutiny. An unstable domestic setup puts China in a favourable position to conduct business as a lack of internal coordination amongst different groups such as political parties, civil society groups, and non-governmental organisations prevents the formation of a united front against discrepancies on China's end. This is important for two reasons: firstly, while providing aid, China focuses on government-to-government engagement, which often impacts the practical implementation of projects (Brant, 2013); secondly, when it comes to infrastructure projects, it is a requirement to employ Chinese workers and source 50 per cent of the construction materials from China, limiting the opportunities for the locals. Under such circumstances, without the strong backing of civil bodies and political actors, the local population will be left at a disadvantage and barred from reaping the maximum benefits of Chinese aid. For instance, PNG's Opposition Party member Gary Juffa expressed concern that the local people were not benefiting from China's Belt and Road Initiative projects and argued that the quality of China's projects was worse than Australia's. (Lo & Lee, 2018) Chinese loans have often been known to lack transparency. This could be an easy trap for nations with corrupt institutions and give an upper hand to external actors, allowing them to exploit resources and people in the absence of reliable safeguards.

In the top two recipients, PNG and Samoa, the lack of strong democratic structures along with autocratic executives in the past increased the scope for China to engage. However, subsequent changes in governments and their shift in stance towards China reveal that strengthening the quality of democracy by combating corruption and pursuing domestically-inclined policies can potentially deter China's engagements, thereby decreasing its influence. The lack of democratic stability in Fiji also allowed China to deepen its engagement in the past. However, the decrease in Chinese aid to Fiji as it began transitioning into a democracy can be seen as an indication of China's troubled relationship with democratic countries.

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