

Australia's Pacific Step-Up Foreign Policy as a Response to the Increase of China's Influence in the Pacific

Meinita Hasya Eka Wulandari

Universitas Nasional

E-mail: meinita2105@gmail.com

Hendra Maujana Saragih

Universitas Nasional

E-mail: hendramaujanasaragih@civitas.unas.ac.id

Abstract

The Pacific region has become highly geopolitical due to its economic, strategic, and military significance. Pacific Island countries face several challenges that they are striving to address because many Pacific Island nations have limited resources in terms of finances and skilled human resources, lack of access to technology, capacity building, and economic development, on the other side is prone to natural disasters such as cyclones, tsunamis, and earthquakes, also face challenges in providing adequate healthcare and education services, and are especially vulnerable to climate change whose impact may vary. The issue then becomes the reason for regional and global powers like Australia and China to exercise their capability and aim to fulfill their respective national interests to extent their influence in the region through their foreign policy. Influence pertains to a country's ability to affect other nations' or international entities' decisions, actions, and behaviors. This research uses qualitative methods and foreign policy theory to address the issue further. In this research, Australia emphasizes its foreign policy to the Pacific using The Pacific Step-Up programme to pursue their interest as a long-standing partner and its neighborhood's guardians and counter China's growing presence and influence in the region.

Keywords: Australia, China, Foreign Policy, Pacific

Abstrak

Kawasan Pasifik saat ini menjadi sangat penting secara geopolitik karena signifikansi ekonomi, strategis, dan militernya. Negara-negara Kepulauan Pasifik menghadapi beberapa tantangan yang ingin mereka atasi karena banyak negara Kepulauan Pasifik memiliki keterbatasan sumber daya dalam hal keuangan dan tenaga terampil, kurangnya akses terhadap teknologi, peningkatan kapasitas dan pembangunan ekonomi, di sisi lain rentan terhadap bencana alam seperti seperti angin topan, tsunami, dan gempa bumi, juga menghadapi tantangan dalam menyediakan layanan kesehatan dan pendidikan yang memadai, dan sangat rentan terhadap perubahan iklim yang dampaknya mungkin berbeda-beda. Permasalahan tersebut kemudian menjadi alasan bagi kekuatan regional dan global seperti Australia dan Tiongkok untuk menggunakan kemampuannya dan bertujuan memenuhi kepentingan nasional masing-masing untuk memperluas pengaruhnya di kawasan melalui kebijakan luar negerinya. Pengaruh berkaitan dengan kemampuan suatu negara untuk mempengaruhi keputusan, tindakan, dan perilaku negara lain atau entitas internasional. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif dan teori kebijakan luar negeri untuk memahami masalah ini lebih jauh. Dalam penelitian ini, Australia menekankan kebijakan luar negerinya ke Pasifik menggunakan program The Pacific Step-Up untuk memenuhi kepentingan nasional mereka sebagai mitra lama di kawasan, serta untuk merespon pengaruh China yang semakin meningkat di kawasan Pasifik.

Kata kunci: Australia, China, Kebijakan Luar Negeri, Pasifik

INTRODUCTION

Pacifics, the largest ocean on Earth, covering an area of approximately 63 million square miles (165 million square kilometers) and stretching from the Arctic Ocean in the north to the Southern Ocean in the south, encompasses the vast expanse of the Pacific Ocean, its subregions, islands, geological features, and its significance in shaping the climate and ecosystems of the surrounding regions. The Pacific can be further divided into several subregions or areas. However, this research will focus on Oceania, which encompasses the entire Pacific Ocean and its islands, known for their diverse ecosystems, tropical climates, and unique cultures.

Pacific countries generally refer to nations in and around the Pacific Ocean. These countries are geographically close to the Pacific Ocean and often have common environmental, economic, and geopolitical interests. The countries within it share various connections and interactions due to their geographical location. They engage in trade, cultural exchanges, diplomatic relations, and regional cooperation on various issues such as climate change, security, and economic development.

Countries including Australia and New Zealand, as well as smaller island countries such as Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Tonga, Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, and many others, face several challenges and areas of deficiency that they are striving to address, such as the lacking of development, infrastructure, economic diversity, human resources and skill, health and education, governance and institutional capacity, climate change resilience, as well as connectivity and digital divide, affecting government institutions, public services, economic development, and public trust in general.

This list of turbulences occurred due to the countries' high diversity in geographical positions and proximities, way of life, population and migration prospects, political situations, diverse cultures, and different kinds of developments, literally in every single aspect of life, making it a potential epicenter of instability (Lowy Institute, 2018). Hence, the top priorities are strengthening the region and maintaining its stability.

As one of the most prominent international actors in the Pacific, Australia has a solid and longstanding interest in the Pacific region (often referred to as the Pacific Islands or the Pacific Island Countries (PICs)). This interest is rooted in several key factors such as geopolitical importance, economic engagement, development assistance, climate change, and environmental concerns, and the most important is cultural and historical connections.

The Pacific region holds strategic significance for Australia due to its proximity. Since it is considered Australia's immediate neighborhood, maintaining stability and influence in the Pacific is vital for Australia's national security. Australia considers itself a Pacific nation and recognizes the importance of fostering close ties with its Pacific Island neighbors. As for economic engagement, the Pacific region presents economic opportunities for Australia, where the nation engages in many forms of trade and investment with Pacific Island countries, particularly in tourism, mining, agriculture, and infrastructure development. Australian businesses have interests in the Pacific, and several project such as economic cooperations,

for example, helps stimulate growth and development in both regions.

Historically, Australia also shares historical, cultural, and people-to-people ties with many Pacific Island countries. People of Pacific Islander descent form significant communities in Australia, contributing to cultural diversity and fostering connections between the two regions. Therefore, Australia values its relationships with Pacific Island nations based on shared heritage and cultural affinities. Australia is now one of the largest donors of development assistance to the Pacific Islands. It provides aid and technical support to help address social and economic challenges these nations face, including but not limited to poverty, healthcare, education, and infrastructure development. Australia's aid programs aim to enhance the resilience and sustainability of Pacific Island countries.

For the cultural and historical context, Australia shares historical, cultural, and people-to-people ties with many Pacific Island countries. People of Pacific Islander descent form significant communities in Australia, contributing to cultural diversity and fostering connections between the two regions. Therefore, Australia values its relationships with Pacific Island nations based on shared heritage and cultural affinities.

The relationship showed an intense stretch when China's rise spread rapidly in the Pacific, where its influence reached the nations within the region, making the engagement with the Pacific even more intense, as the result of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) supports many Pacific Island region, where it pushed the making of Australia's Pacific step-up from mere rhetoric to a materialized formal set in the policy ecosystem (Cain, 2019). This

paper aims to examine this new Step Up Pacific policy and the concerns about China's growing presence in the context of funding support and its impacts on some of the Pacific island countries' development, specifically in numerous infrastructures built that renew, lift, and sustain their life. It argues that China will continue to exercise its power, especially in funding and engaging with the Pacific Island countries, amidst the Australian Government responds that worrying the presence of the financial support could pose threats, especially for the countries that are involved and embracing the support given, as well as Australia itself who had security, economy linkages, diplomacy, and people-to-people links at the same time tied tight with the Pacific Island Countries.

Theory

In this paper, the author will use foreign policy theory to analyze Australia's Pacific Step-Up foreign policy during Prime Minister Scott Morrison's term towards China in 2018-2022. A country carries out international relations in international forums, one of which is with foreign policy instruments, which will later be used as a basic guideline for carrying out bilateral, multilateral, or regional cooperation with other countries or political units worldwide.

Countries have different ways of defending their country, therefore analyzing how different countries behave in responding to a change in the structure of the regional or international environment is very important, this is based on the necessity for each country that has interests to fight for the survival and security of its country under an anarchic international environment.

Through the rational actor model, Allison (1971) defines rationality as “value-maximizing choices consistently within certain limits.” Rational decision-makers will choose the alternative that provides the most favorable consequences (Allison, 1971). The basic assumption of this perspective is that the state is considered an actor who will try to maximize the achievement of its targets based on rational calculations of what is happening in the global political sphere. The focus is focused on the interaction between the parties involved. The main factors that influence the process of formulating a country’s policy strategy are the structure of the international system, elite perceptions, strategies of other countries, and the capabilities of the country concerned (Lovel, 1970).

Coplin in Perwita & Yani (2017) then identifies several steps that need to be considered before discussing this model, namely defining the situation that occurs in the external environment, choosing foreign policy objectives, determining several alternative decisions that a country may carry out by the situation and objectives to be achieved; and choose alternative actions from among the existing alternatives according to the situation and the goals to be achieved.

Analysis of Australia’s foreign policy towards China will be based on the consideration that Australia wants its national interests, both economic and military, to be conditioned to be able to adapt to the dynamics created by China’s presence and domination in the Pacific region so that the interests of the two countries do not conflict with each other. In this case, Australia issued a set of foreign policies conditioned to become a

reference for increasing Canberra’s ability to achieve its goals.

Research Methods

This study will be qualitative because qualitative research can be used to understand, investigate, find, describe, and explain the qualities or features of social influence that cannot be explained, measured, or described through a quantitative approach (Saryono, 2010).

Qualitative research methods aim to make systematic, factual, and accurate descriptions of descriptive data derived from books, journals, articles, news, etc., which are still relevant to research, in order to explain a phenomenon in depth while emphasizing the importance of the depth and detail of the data studied.

In this research, data were collected from books, journals, and other sources that are credible and valid for review, which are primarily relevant to the study of Australia, Australia’s security strategy, China’s influence in the Pacific, and the dynamics in the Pacific itself, as well as studies of the role of other countries that are still related to the issue under study.

According to Moleong (2002), data analysis is a process of arranging data sequences into a pattern, category, and basic description, or it can also be interpreted as a process of processing data into new information so that the data that has been obtained from research efforts becomes easier to understand and understand so that later it is helpful as a solution to a problem, especially related to research, where at this stage the accuracy and critical attitude of a researcher is needed.

In this study, the data processing technique used is data reduction, which is used to simplify or reduce data that is not needed so that only data relevant to the

research is used, so that the data obtained only contains meaningful information and facilitates retrieval efforts.

While compiling this journal, the author uses a few literature studies in the form of journals as a framework that is still related to the discussion of Australia, especially its foreign policy and its relationship with China, and how it affects their current diplomatic ties.

Hanum & Olivia (2020) explained that China, with its economic and military capabilities, became a giant Asian power whose dominance then spread to the Indo-Pacific region, spreading worries and threats to other countries such as Australia in the region. Even though the two have long been partners in comprehensive cooperation, China's presence in the region influences Australia's view of China, especially since the relationship between Australia and the United States, especially in this region, is quite close, which is also related to Australia's sovereignty as well as the stability of the Pacific region. has always been Australia's priority (Hanum & Olivia, 2020)

China's rise influences Australia's foreign policy, as stated in the release of the Foreign Policy White Paper 2017, especially in the agenda of adjusting geopolitical and geoeconomic management in the region, and is assumed indirectly as a challenge to supremacy. The United States, one of Australia's closest allies, has impacted the balance of power between the three in the Pacific region to understand better the dynamics occurring in the region.

Hanum & Olivia (2020) use a neorealist perspective with a nation-state level of analysis, which is sharpened with an analytical knife, namely the

theory of balance of power in the form of balancing and engagement as well as the concept of national interest, where these things are different from the research that will be carried out.

Ayson (2016) explained that Australia should see its broader region in terms of the Indo-Pacific, which is also related to its interests but is sometimes ignored. What needs to be considered next is that Australia's strategy on paper, which is outlined in Australia's strategic White Paper on Defense, should be explained in detail so that the focus is more evident. Australia can use its strengths as described in a series of action plans in the guidebook. (Ayson, 2016). A precise definition will make it easier for Australia to interpret the meaning of strategy itself so that it can later be put into practice, bearing in mind a clear view of the various military means that the Australian Government believes in when it is needed (including the defense and financial capabilities required to obtain it), it is essential to note.

As for this third piece of literature, Ayson examines Australia's foreign policy but does not highlight the diplomatic cooperation that Australia carries out with the Pacific and its relationship with China, and his research tends to highlight the 2016 Defense White Paper, so, in this case, the author will contribute in providing the latest updates regularly.

Other than that, Hariri (2020) is using an analytical knife in the form of national interest theory, explaining that the rise of China in the Pacific region is a threat in itself for Australia as an influential political entity that has long had an essential role in the region, because of the significance of its

presence. China in the Pacific then encouraged Australia to increase its role in the region by responding to this by channeling various forms of investment programs, development projects, and incentives to Pacific countries to build infrastructure, which is also interpreted as an action to build a network of power to ward off China's influence in the Pacific (Hariri, 2020).

As for this research, Hariri has the same focus as the research that the author will carry out, namely rivalry and competition between Australia and the Pacific in terms of the struggle for regional hegemony. She also mentions several types of assistance included in the framework of Australia's stepping-up of the Pacific Family program. However, in this case, the difference between the research that the author will carry out is that the author will study the program being implemented in more detail and comprehensively, so it is hoped that there will be continuity in the form of updated information related to the program.

As for the last one, Blaxland (2017) explained that Australia has decades of experience in various bilateral and regional multilateral arrangements. Therefore, the best way for Australia to remain relevant to its role while avoiding escalation in the region is to maintain its partnership with the United States while continuing to engage with China constructively, respectfully, and with open arms to understand China's intentions better and encourage mutually beneficial accommodation (Blaxland, 2017).

As for his research, Blaxland discusses partnerships with many countries but does not explicitly explain the significance of Australia's policies in the surrounding area, which are still

related to China's presence in the same region, so in this case, the author will make a contribution by narrowing the research area to the Pacific region. in connection with the release of the Pacific Step-Up program.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Australia's Significance in the Pacific

Australia's position in the Pacific region is not only understood as necessary but also strategic for Australia to harvest profits in some areas that are mainly related to its own and regional security and stability issues. Australia's geographic location makes it the largest and most powerful country in the Pacific region. Hence, Australia is likely responsible for playing a leadership role in the Pacific due to its proximity and status as a significant regional power. The importance of security and stability in the Pacific is related to Australia's national interests because Australia has a vested interest in preventing security threats, such as transnational crime, terrorism, and the potential for political instability, from spreading into its area, primarily its immediate neighborhood.

The significance of Australia's position as the prominent actor in the region can be seen in its role in The Pacific Islands Forum (PIF). PIF is an intergovernmental organization that brings together the countries and territories of the Pacific region, serving as the premier political and policy-making forum in the Pacific, where it promotes cooperation, dialogue, and regional integration among its member states. Established in 1971 and currently comprises 18 members, including 14 independent and self-governing states in the Pacific, Australia, New Zealand, and

three French territories (New Caledonia, French Polynesia, and Wallis and Futuna). The forum's membership reflects the cultural, geographic, and political diversity of the Pacific region.

The PIF holds an annual leaders' meeting, known as the Pacific Islands Forum Leaders' Meeting or the Pacific Islands Forum Summit, bringing together heads of Government from member states to discuss regional priorities, policy issues, and initiatives and provides an opportunity for leaders to engage in dialogue, address challenges, and make decisions on matters of regional importance. The PIF addresses many issues impacting the Pacific region. Issues addressed include climate change, sustainable development, economic integration, maritime security, human rights, gender equality, health, education, and cultural preservation.

Australia, with its role, seeks to maximize existing capabilities with its position as a member of the PIF, namely the main regional communication forum in the Pacific. Since its founding in 1971, PIF (formerly the South Pacific Forum) has been a critical regionalism of the South Pacific region and a main road for small island nations of Oceania such as Australia, Cook Islands, Fiji, Federated States of Micronesia, Nauru, New Caledonia (New Caledonia, Niue, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Palau, Papua New Guinea (PNG), New Zealand, Samoa, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu to assert their voices through collective forums on critical international issues, thereby strengthening their voice and influence in the issue they focus on (Shibuya, 2004)

The PIF operates through a network of subsidiary bodies and partnerships. These include the Forum

Fisheries Agency (FFA), the Pacific Islands Development Program (PIDP), the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, and the Pacific Islands Forum Trade Ministers Meeting. The Forum also engages with external partners and organizations, such as Australia, New Zealand, the United Nations, and other regional and international stakeholders.

The PIF recognizes the importance of regional security and collaborates on security-related issues. The framework includes initiatives on maritime surveillance, law enforcement, disaster response, and cooperation on transnational crimes. It also addresses non-traditional security threats, including climate change, environmental degradation, and pandemics.

Australia itself plays a significant role in the PIF and holds a crucial position in the organization due to various factors, the first being geopolitical importance. As a significant power in the region, Australia's geographic proximity and status as the largest country in the Pacific make it a central player in Pacific affairs. Its presence and influence in the PIF shape the organization's agenda and decision-making processes.

Australia is also one of the largest donors of development assistance to Pacific Island countries, where it provides substantial financial support, technical expertise, and capacity-building programs to promote sustainable economic development, infrastructure projects, healthcare, education, and other sectors. Australia's assistance enhances its standing and influence in the PIF by supporting the region's socio-economic progress.

Australia is actively engaged in security cooperation in the Pacific and works closely with Pacific Island

countries to address regional security challenges, including transnational crime, maritime security, and natural disasters. Australia contributes to regional stability and security through initiatives such as the Pacific Maritime Security Program and Pacific Fusion Centre, reinforcing its leadership role in the PIF; as one of the largest per capita greenhouse gas emitters, Australia's actions, and policies on climate change significantly impact the region. Australia's participation in climate change mitigation efforts, financial assistance for adaptation, and engagement in multilateral climate negotiations influence the Pacific's priorities and discussions within the PIF.

Other than PIF, Australia is also linked to several prominent international organizations across various fields, including politics, economics, trade, security, and development, such as United Nations (UN), Commonwealth of Nations as a member of the intergovernmental organization of countries that were formerly part of the British Empire, and Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), where Australia becomes the regional organisation's dialogue partner and actively engages with ASEAN on political, economic, and security issues through the ASEAN-Australia partnership. However, Australia is not a member of ASEAN.

Australia's engagement with Pacific Island countries, as well as its direct neighborhood, on bilateral and multilateral platforms allows Australia to advocate for its interests and advance shared objectives such as good governance, human rights, and democratic principles. For Australia,

democracy and good governance are the essential things a nation should possess; therefore, Australia promotes democratic principles and good governance practices, including the rule of law, transparency, accountability, and respect for human rights, as well as encouraging the development and strengthening of democratic institutions, promoting free and fair elections, and supporting the protection of civil liberties.

Through platforms like PIF, Australia is able to maintain strong defense ties with Pacific Island countries and engage in defense cooperation initiatives. It conducts joint military exercises, provides training and capacity-building support, and assists in disaster response and humanitarian operations. This defense cooperation also enhances Australia's security partnerships and influence within the PIF.

With its richness in natural resources, the Pacific Island countries provide limitless valuable economic opportunities, particularly in sectors such as resources, fisheries, tourism, and agriculture. Australia's economic engagement with the Pacific would contribute to regional prosperity and stability. Australia is best known to its Pacific neighbors for its enduring development assistance and aid. Australia's substantial development assistance to Pacific Island countries reflects its commitment to fostering sustainable development and addressing the region's social and economic challenges. Aid programs poured into the region focus on infrastructure, healthcare, education, and governance, aiming to build resilience and capacity within Pacific Island nations.

The Pacific Regional Program is a discrete appropriation that complements Pacific Bilateral programs. A portion of this funding is directly attributable to specific Pacific countries, which is included in their Total Australian ODA. ODA stands for Official Development Assistance, and the total Australian ODA figure represents funding to the Pacific region that is not attributable to a specific country. It includes funding from the Pacific Regional Program, several other regional and global programs, and other Australian government departments.

From July 2015 to June 2016, Australia's total official development assistance budget for the Pacific Regional Program was \$176.9 million (DFAT, 2016). From June 2016 to July 2017, Australia's total official development assistance budget for the Pacific Regional Program was \$129.3 million (DFAT, 2017). Australia's Pacific Regional Program from July 2017 to June 2018 then increased to a more considerable number of \$180.1 million (DFAT, 2018). The budget raised higher to AU\$ 211.9 million for 2018-2019 (DFAT, 2019) and recorded AU\$ 180.2 million for 2019-2020 (DFAT, 2020). The budget increased from July 2020 to June 2021, recording about AU\$ 210.2 million (DFAT, 2021). Since the COVID-19 outbreak hit the region and profoundly affected the Pacific societies and economic, the budget for the regional portion then skyrocketed to AU\$ 356.9 million (DFAT, 2022) to support security and the well-being of the Pacifics, with a focus on four objectives such as supporting increased economic growth; the development of more efficient regional institutions; healthy and resilient communities; and the empowerment of women and girls in the

Pacific, where the regional approach would have most effective results.

China's Interest in the Pacific

In contemporary international relations, China's rise has become a hot topic of conversation and the most anticipated event because of its significance, which has spread worldwide. The Rise of China refers to China's rapidly increasing role as a significant multidimensional global player, especially in the political, economic, and military fields. Over the past decades, China has experienced significant economic growth and modernization, which has expanded its influence in the international political arena.

Today, China emerges as the second largest economy in the world, with a massive total GDP of \$19.373 trillion (IMF, 2023) and extensive global trade chains. China is a significant trading partner for many countries, with manufacturing capabilities and export-oriented industries driving its economic growth. China's economic rise has enabled the country to exert significant influence in international economic institutions and become one of the essential actors shaping global economic policy.

The current wave of Chinese influence is sweeping across the globe, and Australia is no exception, which seems to have stepped in even further than any other country. This phenomenon is related to the efforts of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to try to intervene in democratic systems abroad, for example, in Australia. China is trying to adapt to a democratic society by using soft power, such as building state-funded research centers, increasing

engagement with media outlets, affiliations with educational institutions, primarily universities, and other people-to-people exchange programs.

Along with the growth of China's economic power, China is also trying to expand its geopolitical influence. Through initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which mirrors its vision through its foreign policy, China prioritizes the importance of China's territorial integrity and state security and presents an element of "togetherness" with its allies as what Tsang and Olivia (2022) argue. Therefore, China has ambitions to strengthen its economic ties with countries around the world within the framework of investing in infrastructure projects and fostering sustainable trade relations, which in turn also increases China's influence and presence in the world. Regions such as Africa, Southeast Asia, and Central Asia, even in the Pacific.

With an assertive foreign policy, China's rise means that the country is increasingly active in regional and global affairs, trying to protect its interests and advance its goals. China is investing heavily in its military capabilities by updating its armed forces, expanding its naval and air capabilities, enabling China to project power beyond its borders, and asserting its interests in the international political arena, one of which is the Asia-Pacific region.

Along with its economic and military revival, China is also working to increase its soft power by promoting its culture, language, and values globally, for example, by establishing Confucius Institutes in many countries to promote the Chinese language and culture and has invested in media and exchange—culture

to shape its international image in order to increase its influence.

China is known as Australia's largest trading partner in the Pacific region. Australia and China continue to engage in significant economic cooperation, with bilateral trade reaching a substantial level. China's demand for Australian resources, such as iron ore, coal, and natural gas, is vital. This condition of economic interdependence has brought benefits to both countries.

In essence, Australia and China are close trading partners for each party, where in 2018-2019, China listed itself as an export market as well as a source of imports for Australia, whose two-way trade value soared past \$230 billion, a fantastic value that also proves how important the roles of these two countries are for their respective parties in international trade.

Chinese investment in Australia is prominent in real estate, agriculture, infrastructure, and resources. From the education sector, Australia has become a popular destination for Chinese students wishing to pursue higher education, so this phenomenon contributes to people-to-people exchanges and cultural ties. Australia and China also continue to encourage cultural exchanges, including art, music, sports, and other forms of academic collaboration, to promote mutual understanding and build better relationships at the individual and institutional levels.

The presence of China in Oceania, which is part of the Pacific region, is not a new thing, considering that interactions between individuals can at least be traced back to the 19th century, which was marked by the entrance of Chinese traders whose migration took place

gradually into the region (Willmott, 2007).

Other explicit evidence can also be seen from the application of the “Going Out Policy” by the Chinese Government in 1999, which encouraged both companies and individuals to invest abroad, starting a new chapter in relations with other entities, which then had an impact on the opening of opportunities and opportunities for assistance, trade, and mobility of the Chinese diaspora itself to develop and spread its wings outside their territory so that although they do not dominate in terms of population, migrants from China are found scattered in many countries in the Pacific region (D’Arcy, 2014).

In his analysis, D’Arcy also later mentioned that from the early 2000s until at least 2015, China’s presence sparked the birth of two important narratives, namely “fear” and “agency,” which led to the strengthening of influence, which overshadowed the movement of traditional regional powers that have inhabited the Pacific for a long time. The discourse on fear and concern is related to China’s economic and political intervention as a decisive factor in the potential for regional destabilization. However, then, on the other hand, discourse about “agency” was also born, which was related to the BRI program that penetrated the Pacific region, whose impact was inversely proportional to the concerns about destabilization that had previously been sparked.

With Australia, the literature shows that China’s presence in the Pacific Islands region poses a new threat to power that challenges the economic and political interests of the United States and Australia as regional traditional

hegemony. China’s increase in military capabilities has raised concerns among neighboring countries and prompted responses from other major powers, particularly the United States. Much of this circulation of discourse comes from forums such as think tanks and the media, which spread narratives of fear of China’s aid as a factor that disrupts the interests of existing traditional powers.

Moreover, China’s current position is considered internationally and regionally, especially in the Pacific region, which is the impact of providing international assistance to countries in the Pacific Islands through the BRI framework. China’s BRI, also known as the One Belt, One Road (OBOR) initiative, is a massive infrastructure and development project created by the Chinese Government and launched in 2013. The BRI program aims to improve connectivity and promote economic cooperation between China and countries in Asia, Europe, Africa, and beyond, whose route consists of two main components, namely the land-based Silk Road Economic Belt and the maritime-based 21st Century Maritime Silk Road.

In infrastructure development projects, BRI focuses on developing and improving infrastructure, including roads, railroads, ports, airports, energy facilities, and telecommunications networks, where this infrastructure project aims to improve connectivity and facilitate trade and investment flows between China and BRI donor recipient countries.

Meanwhile, in the context of trade, funding from BRI aims to promote trade and economic cooperation by reducing trade barriers, increasing logistics efficiency, and encouraging business

cooperation. This was done to create new trade routes and markets, especially in the less developed areas along the economic belt and silk route areas.

On the other hand, BRI's massive outreach also encourages policy coordination among donor-recipient countries to align their development strategies and facilitate cooperation in areas such as customs, taxation, and standards to create a favorable environment for transnational trade and investment.

Furthermore, as is well known, BRI, which is a massive development initiative, involves financial cooperation to support infrastructure projects and investment activities. In this regard, China has established various financial institutions to support its initiatives, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Silk Road Fund, which operate to provide funding and investment for BRI projects.

Not only that, the broad categories of BRI assistance, which are still related to development goals, make BRI also open channels for the flow of person-to-person exchanges, cultural understanding, and cooperation in fields such as education, tourism, and research, which are not others aim to strengthen bonds and promote understanding of diverse cultures among countries around the world.

In recent years, the economic belt and silk road initiatives within the framework of the BRI have attracted the participation of many countries, including developed and developing countries, and expanded China's influence, especially in the Pacific, where countries in the Pacific Island region live in prolonged instability, because relatively poor and less likely to have

proper institutional mechanisms to enforce or even ensure political and bureaucratic accountability, leaving many Pacific Islanders vulnerable to financial influence and corruption (Senate Foreign Affairs, Defense and Trade References Committee, 2005:175).

The Pacific region holds significant strategic and economic importance for China due to several factors. The Pacific region is home to important trade routes and rich natural resources. As the world's second-largest economy and a major trading nation, China relies on secure and efficient sea lines of communication for its imports and exports. The Pacific provides vital maritime routes connecting China to the Americas, Australia, and New Zealand markets. Additionally, the region offers access to resources such as minerals, timber, fish, and energy reserves.

The region is a strategic place that makes people's mobility easier and creates such positive impacts for China because it offers various opportunities, including markets for Chinese goods and services, potential investment, and a platform for expanding trade relations. China's engagement in the region through infrastructure projects, trade agreements, and investment initiatives under the Belt and Road Initiative then enhanced economic cooperation and boosted China's presence in Pacific economies.

On the other hand, from a geopolitical perspective, China views the Pacific as recognizing the influence and presence of other major powers, such as the United States and Australia, in the region. Strengthening ties with Pacific Island countries can give China diplomatic leverage and support in international forums. It also helps

counterbalance the influence of competing powers and extend China's diplomatic reach. That geostrategic consideration is also related to diplomatic support, where China has sought diplomatic support from Pacific Island countries on issues such as its territorial claims in the South China Sea, especially Taiwan. By establishing closer relationships and securing the support of Pacific Island nations, China can strengthen its position on these matters and increase its influence in regional and international affairs.

The Pacific region is highly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, including rising sea levels, extreme weather events, and environmental degradation. China's engagement in climate change mitigation and environmental cooperation with Pacific Island countries helps build goodwill, strengthens diplomatic relations, and aligns with its global climate change agenda.

China itself has diplomatic relations with ten countries in the Pacific Island countries, namely with Fiji and Samoa, which both began in 1975; Papua New Guinea followed a year later in 1976; Vanuatu in 1982; Micronesia in 1989; Cook Islands in 1997, Tonga in 1998, Niue in 2007, then Solomon Islands and Kiribati together in 2019. Even from 2006 to 2016, China has donated as much as US\$1.8 billion in loans and grants to its partners in the Pacific (Brant, 2016). With a large amount of funding, China ranks third as the largest donor country in the Pacific Islands after Australia and the United States.

During diplomatic relations, China has held many meetings and gatherings to discuss the development of China's relations with countries in the Pacific

Islands and the developments of the countries themselves in the Pacific. Between 2000 and 2012, China's trade with its regional diplomatic partners even scored a fantastic increase, from US\$248 million to US\$1.77 billion, with zero tariffs imposed on 95% of products from the Pacific Islands region.

In 2015, in the Chinese Government's white paper on vision and joint action to build the 21st Century Economic Belt and Silk Road, Pacific Island countries (PICs) were included in China's Belt and Road Initiatives (BRI) network of regional corridors whose map shows the south line or northern Papua New Guinea (National Development and Reform Commission, 2015). This news was welcomed by regional leaders and increased enthusiasm for BRI in 2017, where BRI was also considered a contribution to the global economy (Pacific Island Report, 2017).

Praise for BRI also continued when, in 2017, China brought and introduced BRI to its diplomatic partners in the Pacific in a series of meetings, one of which was the "Belt and Road International Financial Exchange Cooperation Seminar" and "Post-Forum Dialogue in Apia" forums., where once again the guests representing the Pacific Island countries as the audience at the event expressed their desire to actively participate in the "Belt and Road" cooperation framework (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2017).

Xi Jinping, President of China himself, emphasized further regional openness in welcoming BRI in the Pacific during a meeting with leaders of Pacific Island countries in 2018, prior to the "Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Summit" in Port Moresby, Papua New

Guinea. In a report published in the PNG press, Xi Jinping proudly expressed his belief that the BRI will open up new opportunities for Pacific Island countries to enhance their business relations and connectivity with China, then open opportunities between them and other countries and for other countries. Other island nations should take a more significant role in economic globalization.

BRI funding in participating countries in the Pacific Islands is widely spread, for example, in Papua New Guinea, through many activities such as diplomatic visits, MoUs, or project developments. In 2014, Papua New Guinea Prime Minister Peter O'Neill and Chinese President Xi Jinping were in a meeting in Beijing to declare the opening of strategic cooperation between the two countries. In 2016 and 2017, the Papua New Guinean leader again visited China for more severe talks to formalize the bilateral cooperation between Papua New Guinea and China under the BRI umbrella. The signing of the soft agreement was carried out to finance some infrastructure projects, including the agreement between BRI and the Papua New Guinea Development Strategic Plan for 2010-2030 to ensure harmony between the two countries cooperation (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2016).

After the cooperation between PNG and China was inaugurated, a new round of Chinese-financed projects began. These projects include constructing an inland road, creating a US\$4 billion industrial park, and increasing the water supply to the eastern highlands province of Papua New Guinea. These projects, especially constructing a road network, which can transform Papua New Guinea's economy and facilitate other social

services, are considered the "PNG's Belt and Road Dream," in line with the name of the Chinese program, BRI (Smith, 2017). A year later, Papua New Guinea entered a new phase of cooperation with China under the umbrella of the BRI program, where Prime Minister O'Neill officially signed an MOU strengthening PNG's cooperation with BRI in AIIB membership, whose initiative is considered a crucial step to improve the nation's standard of living (ABC News, 2018).

The same thing was also done by Samoa, where this country, represented by Prime Minister Tuilaepa Sailele Malielegaoi, signed an MOU agreement to carry out economic cooperation with China, primarily related to market access, which at that time was represented by President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Keqiang, under BRI framework, in 2018. This MOU also symbolizes the promise to synergize Samoa's national development strategy with BRI (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2018). In cooperation with Samoa, China has provided funding for infrastructure projects in Samoa, such as building roads schools, and renovating the Apia seaside area.

In Tonga, the BRI's prestige was also considered when a Chinese Communist Party delegation introduced the benefits of trade and financing under the BRI framework to Prime Minister Akilisi Pohiva and his MPs in 2015. Three years later, in 2018, a meeting between President Xi Jinping and Tonga's King Tupou VI agreed to use the BRI scheme as the basis for financing infrastructure development in Tonga (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2018; Xinhua 2018). At the next meeting, Prime Minister Li Keqiang and

King of Tonga Tupou VI agreed to integrate Tonga's development strategy with BRI. China's involvement in infrastructure projects in Tonga is significant, for example, in constructing roads, government buildings, and a new wharf in the capital, Nuku'alofa. China's assistance in rebuilding infrastructure after a typhoon hit Tonga in 2018 must also be underlined. In the history of this collaboration, Tonga was accepted as a member of AIIB before joining BRI membership. At the end of 2018, before the APEC Summit in Port Moresby, Tonga officially joined BRI membership through an MOU and subsequently received a five-year soft loan suspension (ABC News, 2018).

In the Micronesia (Federated States of Micronesia) region, BRI's involvement was only seen when Micronesia officially signed a cooperation MOU with China in 2018. One year later, in 2019, the new President of Micronesia, David Panuelo, visited China and stated that Beijing was a key partner of Micronesia, as well as mentioning Washington as the primary security partner, which is still related to diplomatic protocol and Micronesia's status as a freely associated US state.

Vanuatu's involvement with BRI has been indicated since 2018 when a construction group from Shanghai built the Luganville wharf project, which at that time Canberra suspected as a warning of the possibility of the facility being used for Chinese military purposes, which Charlot Salwai immediately denied as the Prime Minister of Vanuatu himself. (Bohane, 2018). Only in November 2018, Vanuatu through the signing of an MOU with China, officially joined the AIIB membership, where this involvement is considered as an opportunity for Vanuatu to be able to navigate its own

country to take advantage of the opportunities that China has offered to create prosperity for the Vanuatu people. During their collaboration, China has been involved in many infrastructure projects in Vanuatu, including constructing roads and government buildings.

In Niue and the Cook Islands, as two self-governing states still in free association with New Zealand, engagement with the BRI dates back to 2017, when Niue had a US\$14 million overland road reconstruction project paid for by China. In 2018, Prime Minister Niue Toke Talagi signed an MOU with China regarding BRI cooperation (Embassy of The People's Republic of China in New Zealand, 2018). Like Niue, Cook Islands also joined AIIB, which was marked by a statement by Cook Islands Minister of Finance Mark Brown, who stated that AIIB could be an alternative financing for infrastructure development (Harwood, 2017). In 2018, the new Cook Islands officially joined the BRI (Radio New Zealand, 2018).

In the case of the Solomon Islands and Kiribati, China's influence, especially in the BRI-related context, only became apparent when the Solomon Islands and Kiribati shifted their support from Taipei to Beijing in 2019, leaving Taipei with only four supporting countries, namely Tuvalu, Nauru, Palau, and the Marshall Islands in Oceania. In 2019, the two countries signed the BRI, following a state visit to China by Prime Minister of Solomon Islands Manasseh Sogavare and President of Kiribati Taneti Maamau to China in 2020. Furthermore, the Solomon Islands and China announced several projects, including important projects such as the reopening of the Gold mine.

Ridge and construction of facilities for the holding of the Pacific Games.

In Fiji, China was the largest bilateral donor and a source of direct investment to Fiji in 2017 (Pacific Islands Report, 2016). Then in 2018, the enthusiasm of Fiji President Jioji Konrote and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi for BRI's participation was the reason behind the signing of a memorandum of understanding between Fiji and China regarding their cooperation within the BRI framework (Xinhua, 2017). China has provided financing for infrastructure projects in Fiji, including building roads, bridges, and hydroelectric power, as well as supporting the construction of a new sports stadium in Suva, Fiji's capital.

China's Belt and Road Initiatives (BRI) have been gaining traction in certain Pacific Island countries. Even though the Pacific region is not the main focus of the BRI compared to other regions, China's involvement with several Pacific Island countries through infrastructure development projects and economic cooperation is noteworthy. The agreements and commitments undertaken by Pacific Island countries with China demonstrate regional compatibility with the BRI projects created by China and indicate efforts by Pacific Island countries (PICs) to adapt and align domestic priorities with dynamic new conditions.

The Pacific Step-Up

Pacific Island countries face several challenges and areas of deficiency that they strive to address. Many nations have limited infrastructure, including roads, ports, airports, reliable energy, and telecommunication networks. Lacking infrastructure hampers economic development, trade, and connectivity

within and beyond the region. The economies of many Pacific Island countries heavily rely on a few sectors, such as tourism, agriculture, and fishing. A lack of economic diversification makes these countries vulnerable to external shocks and fluctuations in global commodity prices. Developing industries, attracting foreign investment, and fostering entrepreneurship are ongoing challenges.

The Pacific region also experiences a lack of human resources and skills because it faces a shortage of skilled labor and qualified professionals, particularly in areas such as healthcare, education, engineering, and technical expertise. Climate change resilience has also become an important issue to address because Pacific Island countries are among the most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, including rising sea levels, extreme weather events, and ocean acidification. Limited resources and capacity constrain their ability to adapt to and mitigate these challenges, posing risks to infrastructure, livelihoods, and ecosystems.

On the other side, governance and institutional capacity are no better because weak governance, corruption, and limited institutional capacity are challenges faced by some Pacific Island countries, where these factors can also hinder effective policy implementation, economic growth, and public trust and stability. As for health and education issues, access to quality healthcare and education is often limited in Pacific Island countries. There is a need to strengthen healthcare systems, improve health outcomes, and enhance educational opportunities and infrastructure to ensure their populations' well-being and human capital development.

Nowadays, digitalization is a crucial move a nation should make as soon as possible to improve their communication with other nations on the other side of the world. Limited access to reliable and affordable internet connectivity is a significant challenge in the Pacific. The digital divide hampers economic development, access to information, and participation in the global digital economy. Efforts are being made at regional and international levels and within individual countries to address these challenges.

Australia's foreign policy is shaped by several key characteristics that reflect the country's national interests, values, and strategic priorities. These characteristics show Australia's pivotal role in diplomacy, development, and defense (Sora, 2023), contributing to Australia's approach to international relations and its engagement with the global community. Australia strongly emphasizes its regional engagement, particularly in the Pacific region. As a geographically located country in Oceania, Australia recognizes the importance of maintaining regional stability, promoting economic integration, and addressing shared security challenges.

Australia is committed to providing foreign aid and development assistance to needy countries, particularly in Asia-Pacific and the Pacific Islands. Australia's aid programs aim to support economic development, education, healthcare, infrastructure, and capacity-building initiatives, fostering regional stability and addressing poverty and inequality.

The "Step Up Pacific" engagement is an initiative launched by the Australian Government in 2016, during Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull's era, to

enhance its engagement with Pacific Island countries. It aims to strengthen Australia's relationships with its Pacific neighbors and increase its regional presence and influence. The initiatives had been highlighted in Australia's Foreign Policy and Defence White Papers as of fundamental importance to Australia as well, where on 8 November 2018, Prime Minister Morrison announced Australia would take this engagement to a new level to maximize Australia's national power and international influence, and opening a new chapter in relations with the Pacific family amid more contested, competitive world, and global uncertainty (Australian Government, 2017; Lim and Ferguson 2018).

Australia has an abiding interest in the sovereignty, stability, security, and prosperity of the Pacific. Therefore, making the Pacific runs in stability has always been Australia's top priority. As the region's most significant development assistance partner, Australia has committed \$1.4 billion in development assistance to the Pacific in 2019-2020 to help the partner nations address their most significant concerns.

With the Step-Up Pacific Initiatives, Australia will continue helping the Pacific to promote economic prosperity through ambitious schemes such as the incentives of the \$2 billion Australian Infrastructure Financing Facility for the Pacific (AIFFP), the Pacific Labour Mobility Scheme, and the Coral Sea cable, which will deliver high-speed telecommunications to Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands by the end of 2019.

Moreover, Australia is committed to supporting the security priorities agreed upon by Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) Leaders for "Securing Our Future in

the Pacific", including \$500 million over five years to help Pacific nations invest in renewable energy and climate and disaster resilience; the new Australia Pacific Security College; and the Pacific Fusion Centre, with the other wide-ranging program that follows.

Australia is enhancing Defence engagement to bolster capacity, resilience, and interoperability across the Pacific through significant infrastructure developments and joint training activities. The Australian Federal Police have established a Pacific Faculty at the Australian Institute for Police Management. The strength of the engagement is built on deep personal, historical, and cultural ties.

A new PacificAus Sports initiative, church partnerships, and education programs will strengthen and celebrate these personal connections. Australia is rolling out the Pacific-Australia card to streamline travel to Australia by Pacific leaders. It continues to look forward to establishing a diplomatic mission in every Pacific Islands Forum member in the coming years. Lastly, the newly established Office of the Pacific will coordinate Australia's engagement with the region across the Government and drive the implementation of our renewed focus.

We know that The Step-Up initiative encompasses various areas, including diplomacy, security, economic cooperation, and development assistance. Under the policy, Australia has increased its diplomatic presence in the Pacific by opening new diplomatic missions and appointing more resident heads of mission for better communication, collaboration, and engagement with Pacific Island governments.

Within the framework, it is safe to say that Australia is committed to strengthening security cooperation with Pacific Island countries, where initiatives such as joint military exercises, maritime security assistance, and capacity-building programs are involved, to enhance the region's ability to respond to various security challenges, that is caused by China's growing military presence, military capability to be specific, in the Pacific (Shugart, 2021; Harding and Pohle, 2022). The Pacific is best known for its dynamic caused by its attractive position in geopolitical terms; therefore, the Step-Up initiative also focuses on promoting economic development in the Pacific region. Australia has increased its economic assistance and infrastructure investment, supporting transportation, telecommunications, energy, and water supply projects. The purposes are to foster sustainable economic growth and improve connectivity within the Pacific.

The Step-Up initiative recognizes the importance of people-to-people links and educational exchanges. Australia has expanded scholarships and educational opportunities for students from the Pacific Island countries, fostering human capital development and cultural ties between the two regions. Given the vulnerability of Pacific Island countries to climate change and natural disasters, the Step-Up initiative emphasizes climate change resilience and disaster risk reduction. Australia has committed to supporting the region in adapting to climate change, reducing emissions, and building resilience to extreme weather events.

The Step-Up Pacific Engagement reflects Australia's recognition of the strategic importance of the Pacific region

and its desire to strengthen ties with its Pacific Island neighbors. It aims to promote cooperation, stability, and sustainable development in the region while countering the influence of other external actors in the Pacific.

Development has been part of Australia's international relations since World War II. We can see the date back from the early focus of Australia's development assistance exercised on the administration of Papua New Guinea under a United Nations Trusteeship, which included development and humanitarian requirements and support for the Colombo Plan, a major Commonwealth initiative established in 1951 to provide social and economic assistance to Asian and Pacific countries.

Like most other (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) donor countries, Australia's aid serves both strategic and development purposes. It aims to reduce poverty, promote development, and meet humanitarian needs. Nevertheless, it is also used to advance Australia's strategic interests and express Australian values internationally. Australia put the Coalition Government's Pacific Step-up as the strategic response to China's growing influence in the region while contributing to the region's development goals at the same time.

In line with the Pacific Step-up framework, Australia is continuing its efforts to deal with COVID-19 in the Pacific by helping to grow the economy, build resilience, and enhance regional stability. The COVID-19 situation in the Pacific has dramatically affected the people and economy of the Pacific. Pacific Island countries are also aggressively containing the spread and impact of the outbreak.

In July 2022, the Leaders of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) launched the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent as a blueprint to advance Pacific regionalism. This blueprint articulates the region's long-term vision and values, as well as being an instrument that will guide PIF's priorities and involvement because it is undeniable that the Pacific region continues to be a contested geostrategic space and every program implemented by Australia must be adaptive in order to survive in an environment full of uncertainty, and so that Australia is also able to address strategic issues whose dynamics are high-speed.

During the pandemic, Australia's role and support, as well as initiatives, particularly as a regional power, have helped PIC to continue to develop regional responses to the challenges faced by the Pacific, including the health, security, and economic impacts of the pandemic. The Pacific Community (SPC) continues strengthening health systems and preparedness during the pandemic, including disseminating information and advice on social distancing, protocols, vaccinations, and support for mental health and psychosocial issues.

The partnership under the Pacific Aviation Program is also well underway, with seven airlines ensuring more than 360 flights across nine Pacific countries, moving more than 23,000 passengers and 3,200 tonnes of cargo as part of the mobility. Maintaining connectivity in the air across the region is very useful for maintaining supply chains to support economic recovery efforts. Supporting PIC to expand coverage of COVID-19 vaccines in a safe and timely manner has been one of Australia's top priorities.

In 2021-22, Australia delivered more than 3.4 million doses of COVID-19 vaccine to Pacific countries and Timor-Leste, supporting procurement and delivery of vaccines through the Regional COVID-19 Vaccine Access and Health Security Initiative (VAHSI). Australia supports SPC (Pacific Community) as an essential regional health partner. SPC is coordinating technical support with the World Health Organization (WHO) and UNICEF on the Joint Incident Management team for COVID-19. The SPC also led efforts to tackle non-communicable diseases (NCD) through the Pacific Legislative Framework, which the Minister of Health approved. On the other hand, the Royal Australian College of Surgeons continued medical team visits to the Cook Islands, Fiji, and Nauru and conducted ongoing mentoring programs for Pacific doctors and training courses through telehealth programs.

To maintain stability, Australia continues to work with PIC to secure maritime resources to meet food security challenges, which have worsened due to the COVID-19 outbreak, which has hampered work. Australia also supports regional efforts to improve community-based fisheries management and build resilient coastal communities, such as Kiribati, Vanuatu, and the Solomon Islands.

Apart from that, Australia also helps the PIC determine their maritime zones, one of which is to study and understand the impact of rising sea levels. This support resulted in developing and ratifying the Declaration on Preserving Maritime Zones in the Face of Climate Change-related Sea-Level Rise related to Climate Change and signing a maritime boundary agreement between Fiji and the Solomon Islands.

At the 26th UN Climate Change Conference of the Parties in 2021, Australia announced \$2 billion in climate finance for 2020-2025, including a \$700 million commitment to resilience to climate change and disasters in the Pacific. In addition, the inaugural Pacific Islands Forum Meeting was held in June 2022. The meeting recognized the challenges faced by women and girls in the Pacific and affirmed regional commitments to address gender inequality.

Australia has continued to support higher education delivery in the Pacific through its partnership with the University of the South Pacific (USP) and supporting the Education Quality and Assessment Program to conduct the Pacific Islands Literacy and Numeracy Assessment since the start of the pandemic. PacificAus Sports, on the other hand, also has partnerships with many of Australia's national sports organizations that support the success of Pacific sport, including team Fijiana Drua, who won Australia's elite Super W (women's) competition in their debut season. PacificAus Sports is developing a 'Pacific pathway,' namely to encourage the involvement of various sports in competitions at a higher level, such as the Brisbane 2032 Olympic and Paralympic games, working more intensely with partners in the Pacific region.

Another program is the Church Partnerships program, which continues to go hand in hand with the Pacific Conference of Churches and its members through networks such as the Pacific Church Partnership Advisory. Also, elsewhere, Australia has continued to provide anti-corruption technical advice and support throughout the Pacific, for example, by supporting a training course

for the Vanuatu Public Prosecution Service to strengthen investigative capacity in its security operations.

In February 2022, Australia co-hosted the Global Disability Summit Pacific Satellite Summit, which provided persons with disabilities in the Pacific with a global platform as well as opportunities, particularly in the Pacific region, for persons with disabilities, intending to mobilize support for disability inclusion in the region. Australia continues to help PICs develop their sovereign security capabilities, aligning this with assistance provided with crucial priorities according to the 2018 Boe Declaration on Regional Security.

The Australian Border Force (ABF) provides Border Fundamental Aviation training to frontline Customs, Immigration, and Police officers in Tonga, Nauru, and Vanuatu, as well as introductory maritime courses for officers in Fiji. The Australian Federal Police continues to build regional law enforcement capabilities and combat transnational organized crime through the Pacific Transnational Crime Network. Over the Australian Defense Cooperation Program and its longstanding Pacific Maritime Security Program, Australia also awards purpose-built Guardian-class patrol vessels to Vanuatu, Papua New Guinea, the Federated States of Micronesia, and the Cook Islands. In addition, the Australia Pacific Security College and Pacific Fusion Center are continuing their engagement in the region, with the College continuing its online learning platforms operating during the pandemic.

In the COVID-19 economic recovery efforts, Australia, with assistance from the Pacific's COVID-19 response,

supports governments in the Pacific and Timor-Leste to sustain spending on vital services. \$80 million in funds provided in 2021-22 through the government system (public and sector budget support) is used to fund a tuition subsidy program in Papua New Guinea. It is sent as fiscal support to Fiji on its priority economic reform agenda. In 2021, Australia established the Australian Infrastructure Financing Facility for the Pacific (AIFFP) program, which further financed new projects in 6 countries over the period 2021-22, with the AIFFP's lending limit also more than doubled to \$3 billion.

The development agenda in the Pacific has been a priority for Australia for a long time, where connectivity is also one of its focuses, which is marked by the progress of the Palau cable driver, the passage of the East Micronesia Cable project, which is the result of consultation with the Government of Timor-Leste to build the first underwater cable in the country. In addition, Australia is also supporting Telstra in acquiring Digicel Pacific, a leading telecommunications service provider in the Pacific, with the intention of facilitating the flow of communications in the region.

Meanwhile, AIFFP will focus on implementing the government's Pacific Climate Infrastructure Financing Partnership to address climate change issues. Thousands of Pacific islanders have completed studies with the Australia Pacific Training Coalition (APTC). Programs include micro-credentials courses such as job skills and digital literacy, targeting tourism and hospitality workers who are particularly facing unemployment due to COVID-19, and counseling training to recognize the social impact of the pandemic.

Australia gave support for the establishment of the Pacific Agreement on Closer Economic Relations (PACER) Plus in 2021 in order to continue to support the improvement in the quality and coverage of statistics in the region through partnerships, one of which is by introducing a more streamlined and efficient approach to labor mobility, by combining the Seasonal Worker Program and the Pacific Labor Mobility Scheme under the Pacific Australia Labor Mobility (PALM) scheme which began in 2022.

Thousands of workers arrived under the scheme from July 2021 to 30 June 2022, able to overcome Australia's labor shortage and provide support for their families in the Pacific that the pandemic has hard hit. Workers under the PALM program earn an average monthly income of more than \$1,000 to help their families meet living expenses. In addition, the ADB and World Bank Portfolios in the Pacific include over US\$1.2 billion and US\$700 million, respectively, for projects that support response activities related to COVID-19, which Australia and partners ensure assistance is well coordinated and right on target. Australia's contribution can also be seen from other cases, namely Australia's finances of \$ 21 million to the World Bank, enabling the signing of a World Bank loan of \$ 80 million to the Government of Papua New Guinea to introduce the country's social assistance program aimed at pregnant women and early childhood (DFAT, 2022). By engaging deeper with Pacific Island countries, Australia seeks to foster regional stability, economic growth, and cooperation while addressing common challenges and building enduring partnerships.

Understanding Australia's Pacific Step-Up Strategic Aims

Australia and China are two countries that have a strategic position for each other. So far, Australia and China have been involved in many regional initiatives, including multilateral forums and dialogues. The two countries have participated in the ASEAN Regional Forum, the East Asia Summit, and other regional mechanisms. They have cooperated on regional security issues, including counterterrorism, non-proliferation, and maritime security.

Australia and China, in their diplomatic relations, continue to encourage cultural exchanges, including art, music, sports, and academic collaboration. This exchange aims to promote mutual understanding and build relationships at the individual and institutional levels. However, Australia and China's cooperation over the past five years has been marked by a mix of cooperation and challenges. Even though there are areas of cooperation that are mutually beneficial for each party, it is undeniable that the relationship between the two is strained and faces significant tension, especially in the economic and political fields.

The escalation in relations between the two is the impact of China's rise, creating challenges and tensions in international relations. Its economic practices, such as state-led capitalism, intellectual property rights concerns, and market access restrictions, have been points of contention with other nations. China's territorial claims and assertiveness in regional disputes have also led to friction with neighboring countries and have sparked concerns about regional stability.

This phenomenon cannot be separated from the efforts of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to try to intervene in democratic systems abroad, for example, in Australia. China seeks to adapt itself to life in a democratic society by using various soft power, such as state-funded research centers, media outlets, affiliations with educational institutions and universities, and people-to-people exchange programs. Its programs reflect how independent civil society institutions work in a democracy, masking that the party-state controls similar civil society activities, which are tightly suppressed in China.

This expansion is also tied to China's overseas economic interests, where the Chinese Government has intensively focused its influence initiatives on clouding policy and suppressing voices outside China's borders that criticize the CCP by targeting the media, academics, and communities associated with discussion and policymakers. Beijing seeks to penetrate institutions in democratic countries that might attract attention or pose obstacles to the CCP's future interests.

China's economic activity is an essential tool in efforts to spread influence to target countries because Beijing is very skilled at using its economic influence to advance political goals, especially in terms of well-conceived ideas or ideas, to then work through "indirect" channels that flow slowly and reasonably hidden, unless one examines Chinese business activity to those Beijing influence efforts.

Belt and Road Initiatives (BRI), which is China's big agenda that offers potential benefits, such as increased trade, infrastructure development, and

economic growth, also faces criticism and raises the concerns of many parties, one of which is Australia, when the aid is distributed to the Pacific Island countries, where Australia has been a traditional power in the region, as well as a partner in many ways for the countries within it.

The continuation of the BRI project raises concerns because the project leaves debt burdens for its member countries, impacts the environment, lacks transparency, contains geopolitical implications, and unequal potential benefits among participating countries. In addition, particularly for Australia partnering with Pacific Island countries receiving assistance in various forms from the BRI scheme, there are concerns about the transparency of foreign investment, which carries national security implications, leading to increased oversight and stricter regulation by the Australian Government.

Today, China's power is evident in Europe, sub-Saharan Africa, and even the Pacific, where China's involvement in infrastructure and media has grown markedly in recent years. In this case, to understand the distribution of these forces, more comparative studies are needed to understand the impact of these activities globally. Experts, officials, political leaders, not even Australian journalists, have been involved in the global debate about how the Chinese Communist Party is working covertly to influence democratic political processes around the world. The Australian Government became one of the parties which then formulated a response in the form of a policy to deal with and deal with this influence.

These efforts, apart from having a wide scope and impact on Australia as

well as the Pacific region, also have an international impact, in which Australia's actions are interpreted as a phenomenon that "awakens" people in many countries to see how China's activities work within the scope of the region. In addition, Australia's attitude in responding to Chinese influence in its territory is like setting off the alarm for a new global battle.

China's growing influence in the Pacific region has made Australia focus on responding to the role of aid in advancing Australia's interests. The security agreement between China and the Solomon Islands, announced in 2022, is one of the significant events that marks a new chapter in the friction between Australia and China in the Pacific. Many argue that the occurrence of this incident, under the leadership of Prime Minister Scott Morrison, shows that efforts in the "Pacific Step-up" program have failed to achieve one of its implied goals, namely to ensure that the Pacific Islands in their development do not embrace China.

The points in the Pacific Step-up, while supporting issues such as health and education, which are important areas, are considered insufficient if Australia is to reach the stage of a shared understanding of regional collective security. Australia, in this matter of fact, needs to mobilize all its foreign policy tools to build trust and provide support and more efforts to prioritize security and development issues in the Pacific, especially in areas where Australia can offer unique advantages with added value, such as Australia can direct its policies towards increased labor mobility and greater economic integration in the Pacific region, which is currently the theater of great power competition.

Australia is both a target and an attractive venue for Chinese Communist Party operations because of its strategic value as an ally of the United States in the contested Asia-Pacific region. (Searight, 2020). China's long-term strategic goal is to erode the dominance of the United States in the region as an ally of Australia itself (Hanum, 2020), as well as a significant power in the region by "disarming" the forces of its allies and partners, and only leaving China as a regional power whose influence is unquestionable.

Moreover, regarding territorial claims, namely the South China Sea, neutralizing allies such as Australia in the South China Sea issue will even provide significant results for China because this will drastically weaken America's regional leadership and, on the other hand, will strengthen China's presence in pursuing its ambitions in the South China Sea. South China Sea and elsewhere.

China has also targeted more specific strategic and policy goals at different times. In 2016, China wanted Australia to show "respect" for China's position in the South China Sea when China's assertive behavior met with strong resistance from the United States and other countries in the region. Then, in the shadow of the COVID-19 outbreak, China's relations with Australia heated up again, rooted in the origins of issues surrounding the virus outbreak. Beijing has shown an unfriendly attitude as Canberra has taken what it sees as a hostile initiative. It began with Australia leading in highlighting and calling for a global independent investigation into the origin of the virus outbreak, leading to China.

Australia, on the other hand, also has a vulnerable side, which is an

opportunity for Beijing to make Canberra its target country because, among all developed democracies, Australia is the country that is most economically dependent on China, as it is well known, China is a partner the largest trade union for Australia today, which has created an implied natural support within the business community as well as among university administrators and political leaders at the state and local levels. Moreover, the Chinese community, or ethnic Chinese, whose population is relatively large in Australia, also offers other potential support and influence for Beijing.

The importance of Australia's involvement in regional cooperation mechanisms to address shared challenges and promote collective responses is an action Australia should emphasize in partnership with the Pacific. Participation in forums such as the Pacific Islands Forum, engaging in dialogue and cooperation on regional issues such as climate change, disaster resilience, and sustainable development, strengthens partnerships to maintain regional stability. They emphasize the importance of solid and lasting partnerships with Pacific Island nations, conducted by respecting their sovereignty, engaging in meaningful dialogue, and simultaneously opening the gates of freedom, supporting their aspirations. For self-determination and development, to overcome common challenges, and to promote shared prosperity.

Even though the response that was seen along with the implementation of the policies that Australia carried out had an impact that was still far from the word successful in Australia itself, the response that was given still contained significant

meaning and became a bold step from Australia in maintaining its credibility and influence in the Pacific region. Sustaining a strategy towards China, with its resources and power, will require a more complex level of policy power and political strategy from the diverse layers of society and components of authority in Australia.

CONCLUSION

China's rise in international relations is reshaping the global order and challenging existing power dynamics. It is seen as an essential factor in the evolving balance of power, and its actions and policies have implications for regional security, trade, governance, and human rights.

The rise of China has created challenges and tensions in international relations. Its economic practices, such as state-led capitalism, intellectual property rights issues, and restrictions on market access, have become points of contention with other countries. China's territorial claims and assertiveness in regional disputes have also created friction with neighboring countries and raised concerns about regional stability. Managing China's rise and addressing potential conflicts will be critical to maintaining stability and cooperation in international relations.

The Step-Up Pacific is understood as international aid that contains development goals and strategic goals. Australia uses this policy to strengthen relations with the Pacific region through various programs that will help increase value, mobility, and living standards in the region, as well as being Australia's response to China's influence in the Pacific and its dynamics, which also involve Australia and its allies as a

traditional power in the region. Thus, a comprehensive and effective Australian foreign policy in managing and responding to China's rise and overcoming potential conflicts will be essential to maintain stability and

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