

# Climate conversations and disconnected discourses: An examination of how Chinese engagement on climate change aligns with Pacific priorities

*Tess Newton Cain  
Romitesh Kant  
Melodie Ruwet  
Caitlin Byrne*

**REGIONAL OUTLOOK** Climate Action

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*Griffith Asia Institute*

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## Regional Outlook

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## About the Authors

### Dr Tess Newton Cain

Dr Tess Newton Cain is the Project Leader for the Griffith Asia Institute's [Pacific Hub](#). Within that role she assists with curation for the [Pacific Outlook](#) section of the Griffith Asia Insights blog. Tess is a dual citizen of Vanuatu and the United Kingdom. She is a former Lecturer in Law at the University of the South Pacific. She has lived and worked in the Pacific islands region for almost 25 years, with most of that time spent living in Vanuatu. Tess' research interests focus on politics, policy and development in the Pacific islands region. She has provided research, strategic advice and policy support to national governments, regional organisations (including the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat) and development partners (including the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, the United Nations, and the governments of Australia and New Zealand). Tess provides comment and analysis for media outlets in the Pacific islands region, Australia, New Zealand, and across the world.

### Romitesh Kant

Romitesh Kant is a PhD Candidate at the Department of Pacific Affairs, College of Asia and the Pacific at the Australian National University. He is also an honorary research associate with the Institute of Human Security and Social Change (IHSSC) at La Trobe University, Australia. His research on politics, human rights and social media has been published in Pacific Journalism Review, Asia and Pacific Policy Review, Media International Australia, Contemporary Pacific and the Journal of South Pacific Law.

### Melodie Ruwet

Melodie Ruwet is a PhD candidate in International Relations at Griffith University. Her thesis focuses on interrogating the oceans as political space and large-scale marine conservation projects. She is particularly interested in sovereignty issues related to ocean spaces. Her broader area of research falls into ocean governance, sovereignty issues, small states and the politics of conservation. Melodie holds a BA in Political Science (with minor in Chinese studies) and a MA in International Relations from the Université Catholique de Louvain (UCLouvain), Belgium. Previous to her PhD, she worked as a consultant at the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (UN-ECLAC) in Santiago, Chile.

### Professor Caitlin Byrne

Caitlin Byrne is the Director, Griffith Asia Institute. Prior to joining Griffith University, Caitlin was Assistant Professor of International Relations and Diplomacy at Bond University, Gold Coast. She is also a Faculty Fellow of the University of Southern California's Centre for Public Diplomacy (CPD), and alumna of the Asialink Leaders' Program 2016. Caitlin's teaching and research is focused on diplomacy and soft power in the Asia-Pacific with a special interest in the role and relevance of people-to-people links including those forged through international education, culture, sport and social media. Her research is published in a range of journals including *Politics & Policy*, *The Hague Journal on Diplomacy*, and the *Australian Journal of International Affairs*. Caitlin currently leads a range of funded projects on themes spanning Australia's sports diplomacy; cultural advocacy and diplomacy in ASEAN; and the challenge of digital diplomacy in the Asia-Pacific. Prior to joining academia, Caitlin had established a professional career which spanned strategic management, legal, foreign and social policy roles across government, business and community sectors. Caitlin currently sits on the Executive Council of the Australian Institute for International Affairs (Queensland), and the Australia-America Fulbright Commission's Scholarship Selection Panel (Queensland).

## Acronyms and abbreviations

<b>BRI</b>	Belt and Road Initiative	<b>PNG</b>	Papua New Guinea
<b>BIGDC</b>	BRI International Green Development Coalition	<b>PIF</b>	Pacific Islands Forum
<b>CIDCA</b>	China International Development Cooperation Agency	<b>PRC</b>	People's Republic of China
<b>COP</b>	Conference of the Parties	<b>PRF</b>	Pacific Resilience Facility
<b>CROP</b>	Council of Regional Organisations of the Pacific	<b>SIDS</b>	Small Island Developing States
<b>EU</b>	European Union	<b>SPC</b>	Pacific Community
<b>GCF</b>	Green Climate Fund	<b>SPREP</b>	South Pacific Regional Environment Programme
<b>HADR</b>	Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Response	<b>UN</b>	United Nations
<b>MSG</b>	Melanesian Spearhead Group	<b>UNGA</b>	United Nations General Assembly
<b>MOU</b>	Memorandum of Understanding	<b>USA</b>	United States of America
<b>NGO</b>	Non-Governmental Organisation	<b>WWF</b>	World Wildlife Fund
<b>PICs</b>	Pacific island countries		

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# Executive summary

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This research comes at a timely juncture. Increased geostrategic focus on the Pacific islands region increasingly intersects with the growing urgency in addressing the impacts of climate change. And it is this that Pacific island countries (PICs) have long identified as their first and foremost concern when it comes to security.

Much has been written about the increasing presence of China in the Pacific islands region. However, the place of climate change in engagement between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and PICs has been given very little attention to date.

The findings of this pilot research project indicate that this is an area that reflects diversity and complexity. It is also an aspect of China-Pacific engagement that is developing and evolving. Even during the time in which this research was conducted, significant changes and developments have emerged. Our findings indicate that engagement with China in relation to climate change is a diverse concept, as is so often the way in the Pacific islands region. The nature of the engagement differs between different countries, and the way the engagement operates at the regional level is often different again. This is influenced by several factors, including the maturity of given diplomatic relationships, the attitudes that Pacific officials adopt, and the nature of initiatives that may be under consideration. At this particular time, the geostrategic focus on the Pacific islands region intersects with longstanding discourses, creating opportunity and challenge.

Across our four target countries and at the regional level, it is evident that this aspect of engagement is one that has largely been undeveloped to date. However, our Pacific interlocutors note there are multiple opportunities for this aspect of both bilateral and multilateral relationships to evolve further.

Perhaps the most significant finding is that whether or not issues relating to climate change—mitigation, adaptation or disaster readiness/response—feature in engagements between Pacific and Chinese parties largely depends on what those on the Pacific side of the table introduce. It was a common refrain that Chinese officials and contractors were willing and able to discuss relevant issues as a reaction to them being introduced by their Pacific counterparts.

Following on from this, we found that it was not a common occurrence at the national level for Pacific politicians or bureaucrats to bring climate concerns to the table when engaging with the PRC as a development partner and/or Chinese contractors. This indicates a disconnect as between how the leaders of PICs engage at the regional and/or global level and how they negotiate for development assistance and/or investment when working at home. It also indicates a disconnect between civil society actors in the target countries and their political representatives.

Bilateral relationships between PICs and China are largely seen as being transactional in nature. Civil society and academic observers expressed a concern that at the national level, those who engage with Chinese officials do not prioritise climate change or environmental concerns.

Given that China's work in the region has had such a strong focus on infrastructure, it is not surprising that this was an area of interest in discussions around adaptation to climate change in the Pacific.

At the regional level, officials are more likely to see issues of economic development and climate change as being interconnected. For them, climate change is much more central to all of the conversations that they have, with all partners. However, and possibly as a result of this, they see the climate change engagement with China as being limited in nature.

As part of this research, we road tested the term “climate ally” to see how well it resonated as a description of China from a Pacific perspective. We were interested to note that the most common response was that there was plenty of opportunity for China to *become* a “climate ally” for the Pacific.

Across the board, we heard from our participants that there was room for China to make significant contributions in relation to addressing climate change in the Pacific.

A number of the responses we received, particularly from our regional interlocutors, lead us to ask whether there are opportunities for greater collaboration and cooperation with China on the part of the USA and other development and security partners.

One of the most telling responses to this work that we received from more than one of our interlocutors was that there was very little discussion with Chinese stakeholders in relation to climate change. It was indicated to us that some felt that this was a gap in the overall engagement, particularly at national level. We will be interested to see if further to this work, climate change issues become more prevalent or pronounced in interactions between Pacific stakeholders and their Chinese counterparts.



# Introduction

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This project was designed to explore and assess the extent to which China's diplomatic effort, development activity and economic investment towards Pacific island nations—supports Pacific interests, with a specific focus on the collective Pacific ambition for global action on climate change.

There is no question that China has stepped up its engagement in the Pacific in a bid to build influence in the region over the past ten to fifteen years. Much of the literature addressing Chinese activity in the Pacific is focused on China's interests, means and motivations, or the response of other powers (such as the US and Australia) to those diplomatic activities. There is a gap when it comes to examining Chinese activity from a Pacific perspective. We have inverted this focus by exploring whether and how China engages with Pacific officials and priorities on climate action.

Our research examines how this issue plays out in four target countries and at the regional level. The target countries are: Papua New Guinea (PNG), Samoa, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu.

Our research objectives were to

- locate China's engagement in the Pacific islands climate change discourse;
- explore Pacific perspectives about China's engagement with that discourse;
- contribute to broader scholarship on climate diplomacy.

# Methodology

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The research was framed around the following research questions, which were designed to ensure that the data we collected was focused on understanding the Pacific context for Chinese engagement in relation to climate change and, more specifically, Pacific perspectives on that engagement

1. How does China's position about climate change engagement and climate diplomacy in the Pacific islands region align with its positions elsewhere (e.g. domestically, on the global stage)?
2. How does China engage around climate change within bilateral relationships with Pacific island countries?
3. How does China engage around climate change at the regional level in the Pacific (e.g., with Council of Regional Organisations of the Pacific (CROP) agencies, as a Forum dialogue partner)?
4. How is China's engagement in climate change perceived in the Pacific islands region?
5. To what extent, if at all, does China's engagement about climate change influence how it is seen as a diplomatic/development partner in the Pacific islands region?

There were two primary aspects to the research that we conducted: a desktop study and a series of semi-structured interviews.

## Desktop study: Literature review and media scan

A systematic approach was used to identify and evaluate written evidence to answer the research questions. It incorporated a literature search of online media publications in the four target PICs. A systematic review of the literature on Chinese aid in the Pacific and climate change has been undertaken using online databases. The literature has been evaluated for quality and relevance to the research questions. The content of relevant papers has been summarised to answer the review research questions. A targeted online media scan was undertaken because of the limited published evidence available in the literature on this topic. The online media scan consisted of

- i) structured internet searches of recent speeches, meeting notes as well as government reports and media coverage on Chinese aid and climate change in the Pacific
- ii) database search of the Lowy Institute's Pacific Aid Tracker

## Key Person Interviews

In addition to the literature review and media scans, it was a key priority for our research project to gain insights from local experts who have knowledge of decision/policy-making, advocacy and research into Pacific diplomacy and climate policy and priorities. The target PICs were Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu. We also identified key participants from regional organisations, who were predominantly located in Fiji. A further group from which some of the key informants were selected was the academic community, including in Australia.

Participants from the relevant countries were identified through existing connections, including known policy, research and advocacy networks such as the University of the South Pacific, Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), Pacific Community (SPC), Melanesian

Spearhead Group (MSG), World Wildlife Fund (WWF) Pacific, and Greenpeace. We thus identified critical informants in each of our research sites targeted for in-depth, one-on-one interviews. All interviews were conducted remotely via online Microsoft Teams/Zoom lasting between 45–60 mins. All participants were invited to participate in the study by email, and were advised of the purpose of the research, how information provided would be aggregated and anonymised, and that the project had appropriate ethics approval. All participants provided their consent either in writing or verbally at the commencement of the interviews.

The interviews were complemented with analysis of public documentary sources such as speeches, meeting notes, government reports and media coverage. An approved external transcription company transcribed all discussions, and the content was analysed in relevance to the research questions. This study involved interviews with 14 participants, including policy-makers, media and civil society representatives from target nations.

# Literature review and media scan

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## China – a leader (or future leader) in climate diplomacy?

China is currently the world's largest carbon emission emitter,<sup>1</sup> responsible for over 25 percent of total global emissions. In recent years, China has also become a champion in renewable energies, particularly wind and solar power.<sup>2</sup> Domestically, President Xi Jinping has made several commitments regarding climate change mitigation. In April 2021, he announced China would strictly control coal production by 2025 and phase it down by 2030. He had previously announced China would get to net zero carbon emissions by 2060.<sup>3</sup>

China has increasingly become more active in global climate change policy. In 2015, there was a shift in the Chinese rhetoric regarding international cooperation on climate issues.<sup>4</sup> Xi Jinping's words in 2017 at the 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress revealed that China considers itself a leader in climate cooperation:

*"taking a driving seat in international cooperation to respond to climate change, China has become an important participant, contributor, and torchbearer in the global endeavour for ecological civilisation".<sup>5</sup>*

China is increasingly considered to be – or to have the potential to become, a leader in climate diplomacy.<sup>6</sup>

China considers the lack of development assistance from developed countries to developing countries the biggest obstacle in tackling climate change.<sup>7</sup> China's climate change aid to other countries is coordinated by the China International Development Cooperation Agency (CIDCA), which was created in April 2018. China's climate change aid is closely tied to its humanitarian and development support. In comparison to other significant actors like Australia, the European Union (EU), and the Green Climate Fund (GCF), China's contribution in humanitarian (disaster response) and climate change help is marginal.<sup>8</sup>

## China's climate change policy in the Pacific

In 2014, China established a South-South Cooperation Climate Fund, to which they pledged US\$ 3 billion.<sup>9</sup> In addition, China signed more than 30 Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) on Climate Change South-South cooperation, along with 28 climate change mitigation and adaptation projects, and various training sessions.<sup>10</sup> All of these mechanisms have included participation by Pacific island countries.

China has been seen by some as having capitalised on the lack of leadership in the Pacific region by Australia and the United States of America (USA)<sup>11</sup> when it comes to climate change. In October 2021, China announced it would establish a cooperation centre on climate change with Pacific island countries, in addition to supporting the Blue Pacific initiative and the South Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP).<sup>12</sup>

Denghua Zhang notes that concerns about climate change have grown more prevalent during high-level China-Pacific diplomatic exchanges in recent years.<sup>13</sup> China's climate change aid to the Pacific is not well documented, when looking at the concrete climate change related aid given to Pacific Islands, available through the Lowy Institute Pacific Aid Map<sup>14</sup> we can make a distinction between projects that directly address climate change, and projects that do not explicitly mention it but might have a climate change related dimension.

Additionally, according to Zhang, there are three main areas in which the nation has helped: donations in the wake of natural catastrophes; the building of climate change mitigation or

adaptation infrastructure (e.g. hydropower plants); and capacity building through government scholarships and short-term training programs.<sup>15</sup> In addition, there is also funding of United Nations (UN) or other forum related expenses. For instance, China helped fund the Fiji Conference of Parties (COP) presidency (COP 23 in 2017/18).<sup>16</sup>

### Pacific responses to China's role as a potential climate leader

The image of China as a global leader in South–South cooperation is a powerful soft power tool for the Chinese government in the Pacific islands region.<sup>17</sup> How the Pacific (including civil society) addresses the role(s) of China in relation to climate change issues, is, however, so far absent from the literature.

Based on Pacific leaders' discourse, China might be viewed as a potential climate partner. For instance, in 2019, when Kiribati and Solomon Islands switched their diplomatic recognition of Taiwan to the PRC, both mentioned climate leadership. Senior officials from Solomon Islands recognised that, while there were economic reasons for the switch, climate change was also a factor.<sup>18</sup> In that regard, Prime Minister Sogavare of Solomon Islands commented:

*"We would be simply irresponsible to isolate a global, willing player to assist developing and least-developing countries in the pursuance of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, including actions on climate change".<sup>19</sup>*

### Media scan

In addition to a review of available literature, we undertook a media scan over an 18-month period.<sup>20</sup> The purpose of this scan was to identify statements and/or speeches by leading Pacific island voices that spoke to what is hoped for or expected when it comes to China's role as a "climate ally" for the region. We anticipated that these would fall into the following categories:

- i) items that are directed at the global community, which do not particularly reference the PRC (or anyone else) and
- ii) items that are directed to or particularly reference the PRC (either alone or in conjunction with reference to other countries).

Statements and calls to action of the first type occur quite frequently. Indeed, these calls are ones that have been part of the global leadership on climate diplomacy in which Pacific voices have featured for many years. Calls of this type often occur as part of addresses to the UN General Assembly (UNGA) by leaders of Pacific governments. For example, in September of 2021, the Prime Minister of Samoa, Afioga Fiame Naomi Mata'afa gave her first address to the UNGA. During her speech, she made the position of her government very clear:

*"There is no greater challenge confronting the global community now than that of climate change. For Pacific communities, the real challenge is not about securing more scientific evidence, setting new global targets, and more talk shops. It is about action for survival and we all need to shoulder our responsibilities and play our part. The big polluters and emitters need to demonstrate more commitment and leadership."<sup>21</sup>*

Elsewhere Prime Minister Mata'afa has noted that even where increased emissions reductions have been announced, and welcomed, that:

*"... the emissions gap is worrisome and still puts us on a catastrophic pathway of 2°C of global heating."<sup>22</sup>*

Also, in 2021, Prime Minister James Marape of PNG made a call on large emitters to take action in the context of his expressed desire to save the rainforest of his country and use it to leverage sustainable financing:

*"We want to see major carbon emitters in the industrialized nations be genuine and committed in their actions to fund climate change mitigation and adaptations."<sup>23</sup>*

Whilst it is very common for the term "big polluters and emitters" or something similar to be used as an umbrella for countries such as the USA, China, and Australia, there are also instances where Pacific leaders have identified China as a particular focus for concern. In remarks made in October 2020, Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare of Solomon Islands, identified both the USA and China as "major global emitters."<sup>24</sup> In the lead up to COP26 in 2021, the Secretary-General of the PIF, Henry Puna, singled out China as an emitter of whom more was expected:

*"In our view, as a major emitter, there is much work for China to do,"<sup>25</sup>*

Similar sentiment was expressed by President David Panuelo, of Federated States of Micronesia further to the 2021 (inaugural) meeting of the Chinese and Pacific foreign ministers. President Panuelo called on the USA and China as "our two allies" to work together in relation to climate change, including by way of persuading other countries such as Brazil and Australia to improve their positions.<sup>26</sup>

If we fast forward to May 2022, we see that the importance of action on climate change has been a very important theme during the meetings that Chinese State Councillor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi has held with his counterparts during a ten-day tour of eight countries, including all of those that are the focus of this study.

Also included in the Minister's itinerary was a meeting with the Secretary-General of the PIF, Henry Puna, who put this issue front and centre as a point of engagement:

*"Firstly, urgent and ambitious climate change action. Our Forum Leaders have identified climate change as the single greatest threat facing our Blue Pacific region. Action to keep our world below 1.5 degrees is vital for the future prosperity and wellbeing of our region. We welcome China's climate change commitments and as we look to COP 27 in Egypt and call on all our international partners to submit enhanced Nationally Determined Contributions in line with the 1.5 degrees pathway and net zero by 2050."<sup>27</sup>*

Similarly, Prime Minister J.V. Bainimarama of Fiji also stated that in the second joint China-Pacific Foreign Ministers' meeting (held May 30<sup>th</sup> 2022) he had urged China to make stronger climate commitments when it comes to cutting emissions – noting that he urges all countries to do this.<sup>28</sup>

Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare of Solomon Islands is something of a standout as a Pacific leader who has spoken positively of China when it comes to action on climate change. In October of 2020, he remarked that China was among the first countries to sign the Paris Agreement and that the PRC government sets aside "trillions of dollars" to address climate change.<sup>29</sup> He also made reference to steps taken by China in decommissioning of coal-fired power plants, reducing pollution, introduction of improved regulation and the establishment of three sustainable development zones in Shenzhen, Gulin, and Taiyuan. He commented:

*"These are positive moves which bring comfort to small and vulnerable states like Solomon Islands – that a powerful country and a sizable emitter in the world not only listens to the concern of small vulnerable countries in the world, but commits resources and taking positive steps to address pollution ...In this regard, we are comforted and indeed note with great admiration the positive steps taken by China in the war against pollution."<sup>30</sup>*

We have also seen examples of statements from Chinese officials that have identified addressing climate change as a focus for increased cooperation with PICs. For example, in 2021 during a call between President Xi Jinping and Prime Minister Marape of PNG, this was an area that Xi noted as one where there should be more coordination and cooperation between the two countries.<sup>31</sup> During a call between President Xi and Prime Minister Bainimarama of Fiji, the issue of climate change was not specifically referenced. However, Prime Minister Bainimarama did express his hope that the two countries could “strengthen communication and coordination in international affairs.”<sup>32</sup>

### Spotlight: BRI and Green BRI in the Pacific

The “One Belt, One Road” (Belt and Road, BRI) initiative was launched by China in 2013. It is China’s main international cooperation and economic strategy,<sup>33</sup> and includes a land component—the Silk Road Economic Belt, and a maritime component—the “maritime silk route”.<sup>34</sup> While initially the BRI’s two corridors (land and maritime) were not going through the Pacific, as of January 2022 ten PICs have signed MoUs: Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Kiribati, Niue, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, and Vanuatu. The majority of these agreements were signed during 2018.

The BRI initially attracted some negative commentary with regard to environmental impacts.<sup>35</sup> Subsequently, in 2015, China launched a “Green Silk Road”, later often referred to as Green BRI.<sup>36</sup> In 2017, Xi Jinping announced a BRI International Green Development Coalition (BIGDC)—an:

*“open, inclusive and voluntary international network which brings together the environmental expertise of all partners to ensure that the Belt and Road brings long-term green and sustainable development to all concerned countries in support of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.”<sup>37</sup>*

It was officially established at the second Belt and Road forum, in April 2019. No Pacific Ministry, Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO), or company seems to currently be a member of the BIGDC.<sup>38</sup>

PICs have mostly benefitted from the “Green Silk Road Envoy training programs” a component of the Green BRI which aims to foster collaboration between China and BRI partner countries in sustainability policy through activities such as workshops. Representatives from Samoa, Fiji and PNG participated in a training program between November and December 2019.<sup>39</sup> Two climate change South-South cooperation training sessions were also organised for PICs.<sup>40</sup>

# Findings and discussion

## Participation rates

One of the things that really stood out for us in undertaking this research was the difficulty we had in securing participants for us to talk to. Of the total number of people contacted (n=37), we received replies from 43.2 percent (n=16) and from there, we were able to secure fourteen interviews. Whilst the most common form of non-participation was by way of not responding to our initial or follow up invitations; we also had some people tell us that they did not want to participate because of the 'sensitivity' of the subject matter.

It is not clear whether the sensitivity arises concerning the issue of climate change or the fact that we were interrogating Chinese engagement, or some combination of the two. Another factor that may have contributed to the lack of positive responses to our invitation to participate is that the interviews had to be conducted remotely (via Zoom) due to COVID-19 restrictions. On initial examination, it appears surprising that there was so little uptake by "civil society" given the prominence of climate change as a focus of activity by Pacific NGOs. However, as became apparent from our discussions, at the national level the main point of contact is with Chinese contractors.<sup>41</sup> Therefore, it is not surprising that civil society actors do not have many direct insights or observations to provide.

The table below documents the make-up of the research participants with whom we spoke:

Categories	N of identified to approach	% of total approached	Number of contacted	% of total contacted	N of replied	% category contacted	N of accepted	% of total interviews	N of declined
Academic	9	17.3%	7	18.9%	5	71.4%	5	35.7%	0
Civil Society	14	26.9%	12	32.4%	3	25.0%	3	21.4%	0
Media	5	9.6%	4	10.8%	2	50.0%	2	14.3%	0
Political	9	17.3%	4	10.8%	1	25.0%	0	0.0%	1
Private Sector	3	5.8%	2	5.4%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0
Public Servant	4	7.7%	3	8.1%	1	33.3%	1	7.1%	0
Regional Bureaucrat	8	15.4%	5	13.5%	4	80.0%	3	21.4%	1
Total	52	100%	37	100%	16	43.2%	14	100%	2

## Overview

While not necessarily discussed widely in the Pacific context, it is evident that the Chinese domestic agenda and programmes significantly affect foreign policy, including diplomatic engagement and development assistance and investments. For example, China continues to be a coal-based economy with a politically powerful coal lobby.<sup>42</sup> Even though lobbying does not operate in the same way as we might understand it in the USA or Australia, it remains the case that large coal mining companies (and politicians from provinces with large resource endowments) are politically influential. This influence flows through into foreign policy announcements and positions, such as we saw happen at COP26 in Glasgow, with a last-minute change to the text of the communiqué further to interventions by the delegations from China and India.<sup>43</sup>



Climate change has been a missing piece of the puzzle when it comes to Chinese engagement with PICs. This is even though climate change has been the focus of an increasing proportion of Chinese development assistance to the Global South. Although China's foreign aid programme included climate elements as far back as 2007, the National Development and Reform Commission announced the intention to more or less double the quantum of this support in 2012.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, China has become more active in global climate diplomacy forums such as the COP meetings.

China's primary focus when it comes to climate change and the Pacific is on bilateral engagements rather than multi-lateral or regional efforts. This is not surprising as it aligns with how China engages in other sectors. However, that is not to say that there is no multilateral engagement, and, indeed, there are indications that this may become more significant in the future. Of particular significance in this regard is the inaugural meeting between the Foreign Minister of China, Wang Yi, and the Foreign Ministers of those Pacific islands countries with which the PRC has diplomatic relationships. This was a virtual meeting held in October 2021. Foreign Minister Wang Yi announced at this meeting that his government would establish a China-Pacific Climate Action Cooperation Centre:

*"12. All parties shared the view that climate change is a major challenge facing humanity and are committed to jointly promoting the full and effective implementation of the Paris Agreement and a fair and equitable system of global climate governance for win-win cooperation. China understands the special difficulties of Pacific Island Countries in tackling climate change, and will set up a China-Pacific Island Countries climate action cooperation center and continue to assist Pacific Island Countries as it can in enhancing capacity building to tackle climate change under the framework of South-South cooperation."<sup>45</sup>*

In April 2022, Vice Foreign Minister Xie Feng virtually attended an unveiling ceremony of the Center in Laoicheng City, Shandong Province. The choice of location is noteworthy. Some would certainly have expected it to have been located in the Pacific islands region, possibly in Samoa. However, the choice of Shandong Province is significant, given its established provenance as a location of Pacific study and research.<sup>46</sup> The question remains as to the extent to which the work of this centre will be informed by Pacific perspectives and expertise. Similarly, we are yet to learn of the extent to which Pacific academics and other experts will be able to contribute to the work of this centre. Elsewhere, concerns have been raised as to the extent to which Chinese think tanks can operate with autonomy<sup>47</sup> and this is likely to be a question that arises in this context as well.

From the perspective of Pacific officials who work at the regional level, climate change is an integral contact point for engagement with all development partners. In addition, regional interlocutors are more likely to see engagement in relation to climate change as part of a broader, deeper articulation of Pacific interests and concerns:

*"Everything is related to each other. I don't think you can look at climate policy in isolation. It's linked with the security interests. It's linked with trade and economic interests ... if you look at the Boe declaration, for example, climate security is mentioned ... climate and security are linked together ... that's how we look at climate issues ... from a multidimensional lens." [REG 001]*

A similar view that illustrates the interlinked nature of climate change issues in the region was expressed by a leading civil society participant:

*"This is the reality of the Pacific islands. You cannot stop the adaptation unless the emissions is [sic] slowing down. You cannot mitigate unless the emission is getting down ... we do adaptation, we do mitigation. But should we have to do more? That's the real question." [VAN 002]*

This is perhaps the clearest manifestation of the “disconnected discourse”. It is not the first time that this apparent disconnect between a regional position and national political imperatives has been identified and it is unlikely to be the last. Given the importance of the challenges of climate change across the region, and the significance of this issue within the current geopolitical discourse, this is a crucial aspect of the data we have collected.

At the bilateral level, when it comes to how Pacific policymakers engage with Chinese interlocutors in relation to particular projects or investments, climate change is only a factor if it is introduced by the Pacific participants. One of the strongest messages we received from our participants is that China is seen as responsive or reactive to what Pacific countries put forward as their priorities:

*“The onus is on us, the Pacific Island Countries, to ask China for climate change [funding] ... but at this point in time, yeah, we’re not asking for climate change aid. We’re asking infrastructure ... And even if we ask for infrastructure funding, maybe we should expand on the idea ... It should be informed by climate change that would in a way be better. Sustainability of that kind of infrastructure.”*[SOL 004]

Bilateral relationships between PICs and China are largely seen as being transactional in nature. Civil society and academic observers expressed a concern that at the national level, those who engage with Chinese officials do not prioritise climate change or environmental concerns:

*“I don’t think our officials really understand the importance of climate change ... Perhaps our leaders just use climate change as the basis to negotiate for funds or development assistance. There is really a lack of understanding of the science or the urgency of the situation.”*[PNG 001]

This is at odds with how Pacific views are perceived outside the region. In some cases, this may also be counter to how national positions are put forward at regional and/or global levels:

*“Our political leaders are just posturing on global platforms.”*[PNG 001].

This disconnect is not surprising and has been reflected elsewhere.<sup>48</sup> It speaks to the complex political economy of Pacific island countries, which manifests in climate change policy and discourse as it does in other spheres.

A related issue is the extent to which political leaders who engage with Chinese counterparts are guided or informed by wider community views in relation to climate change:

*“Papua New Guinean leaders perhaps are not engaging with the wider community especially non-government organisations and civil society groups who are at the forefront of dealing with climate change.”*[PNG 001]

When it comes to engagement with civil society on the part of China, this is seen as very low priority when it comes to climate change. Several participants reflected that Chinese engagement with civil society groups focused on climate change was insignificant, including in relation to funding climate change relevant research:

*“But I can only share that perspective on how the civil society organisations think. This approach is that even for civil society organisations say we never approached them when anything comes up from climate change. We’re always going to other countries like the UK, France, or Australia, but never with China.”*  
[VAN 002]

## Pacific/China engagement in relation to mitigation

Overall, our research indicates minimal engagement between China and Pacific island countries in relation to mitigation issues. There is undoubtedly some awareness that the issue of mitigation is problematic when it comes to domestic policy within China:

*“China’s really interesting on climate change and in some ways it’s not a million miles from Australia in that they are juggling a lot of different constituencies domestically”*[ACA 002]

However, we also noted a perception that reaching ‘carbon neutrality’ by 2060 can be accepted as ‘honest’. And so, advocacy and lobbying in relation to curbing emissions are better directed to those large emitters yet to make meaningful commitments. Conversations with China may be better directed to areas where they are less active such as supporting disaster readiness projects [VAN 002].

A number of our participants indicated that Pacific island leaders are not pressing China to improve their position in terms of cutting emissions. One reason for this that was identified during this research in relation to PNG, was that Papua New Guineans are too respectful or deferential in their dealings with China, as a reflection of that country’s economic might:

*“They can sometimes hinder big ticket items for SIDS, particularly when it comes to emission reduction”*[REG 003]

There was a range of responses in terms of how our respondents viewed China’s global position in relation to climate change. For some, it appears that this is something of a gap in how Chinese engagement is portrayed and understood:

*“it’s really not clear”*[SOL 003]

However, there was certainly evidence to indicate that some Pacific interlocutors are aware of how China is positioning itself on the global stage when it comes to mitigation commitments:

*“But one of its commitments in COP was that it was no longer going to be financing new coal fired power stations overseas. Hmm. So that’s an interesting one. We haven’t got any of them in the Pacific, so it’s not terribly relevant to us, but obviously they are. Obviously, finance have been financing it elsewhere and whether those new commitments relate to projects that are already planned or just ones that are not yet planned”*[PNG 002]

## Pacific/China engagement in relation to adaptation and climate finance

When it comes to adaptation to climate change, several participants noted that there was scope for China to play a more significant role, particularly in relation to technology transfer:

*“On the other hand, I mean, clearly when it comes to climate and there are technologies and capacities that China has that if it wants to, it could provide and help extend to Pacific island nations”*[PNG 002]

One of the points raised is that the categorisation of the PRC as a developing country creates a ‘quirk’ when it comes to climate finance because they are competing for funding from the same envelope that small island developing states (SIDS), including those in the Pacific, are trying to access. In addition, their designation as a developing country has allowed them to ‘evade’ any responsibility/expectation that they would be contributing to climate finance mechanisms such as the GCF.

The issue of climate financing overlaps with concerns about the nature of financing between China and PICs more generally. This, in turn, is significant in relation to the blurring of any demarcation between climate finance and development finance (which is beyond the scope of this study). The risks associated with increased levels of debt are very present in the thinking of Pacific interlocutors, and it is not surprising that a preference for grant funding rather than debt financing was expressed:

*“But when it comes to climate finance in general, particularly in the region, grants is the most preferable. ... And the fact that when China provides finance, it brings its own people, ... you know, the spill over benefits, really of projects to local communities. You know, it's very much minimal because everything goes back to China, really”*[REG 003]

Given that China's work in the region has had such a strong focus on infrastructure, it is not surprising that this was an area of interest in discussions around adaptation to climate change in the Pacific. For example, we heard that there was a need to ensure that infrastructure projects focus on climate resilience or climate proofing. This includes making modifications to projects where required. These concerns easily bleed into wider consternation about large infrastructure projects funded by China, including in relation to quality and local content:

*“China is probably wanting to sort of upgrade the status because it's getting a bit of negative feedback from around over the quality of the calibre of some of its projects ...so they're probably going to be open to raising their standards or at least being perceived as raising the standards”*[PNG002]

There are indications that Chinese contractors are aware of the need to ensure that infrastructure in the Pacific is fit for purpose and are open to addressing concerns about climate-proofing if and when they are raised. However, we also heard that there was a need for greater oversight of the companies undertaking these projects, including how they are addressing relevant climate change issues. The significance of local governance structures and systems for getting the best development outcomes from Chinese infrastructure projects has been examined elsewhere, although not with specific reference to climate change aspects or imperatives.<sup>49</sup>

## Pacific/China engagement concerning disaster readiness and response

Unlike traditional humanitarian donors such as the USA, United Kingdom, and the EU, established donors that offer a significant amount of funds, experience, and policymaking to humanitarian response operations in major catastrophes and complex crises, China conducts its foreign aid differently.<sup>50</sup> Over the previous decade, China's annual humanitarian contributions have ranged from about \$1 million to around \$130 million. Chinese humanitarian aid accounted for less than 1 percent of the total recorded aid in 2017.<sup>51</sup>

Our conversations with research participants bore this out. There were no references to China having contributed to disaster response in the target countries. That is not to say that China has not contributed to disaster response, because it is certainly the case that they have.<sup>52</sup>

Even while China's foreign policies influence its humanitarian aid, it does not have an established public humanitarian policy beyond the need to assist those in need. Chinese NGOs are still a relative newcomer in terms of international humanitarian aid, despite being a vital element of China's internal disaster management system. In times of crisis, they frequently rely on Chinese firms and the Chinese diaspora in the host country to set up activities on the ground.<sup>53</sup>

In 2021, China established three centres to assist Pacific Island countries: *Pacific Island Countries Emergency Supply Reserve*, *Poverty Alleviation and Cooperative Development*, and *Pacific Island Countries Climate Change Cooperation Centre*.<sup>54</sup> As noted above, this may indicate an intention to expand the amount of multilateral/regional engagement in which China engages in this area.

Another reason that may account for the lack of visibility of China in the field of Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Recovery (HADR) is that until very recently, the Chinese military has not been a part of this work. This contrasts with the highly visible interventions through military deployments by countries such as Australia and New Zealand.<sup>55</sup>

One aspect of disaster response that was not mentioned by any of our informants but which is noteworthy is the role of Chinese state-owned enterprises that operate in Pacific island countries and of Chinese community groups, including business associations. It is possible to point to numerous instances of companies and community groups making contributions both in cash and in kind to relief efforts in the countries in which they are resident.<sup>56</sup>

### Is China a climate ally for the Pacific?

One of the questions we asked our participants is how China is seen as a “climate ally” either for individual PICs or for the Pacific islands region more generally. The responses to this were mixed and instructive. One of our participants said that he felt that Pacific perceptions had shifted since the COP26 meeting in Glasgow in terms of how China performs on the global stage. He contended that the late intervention by China (and others, including India) to water down the text of the Glasgow Climate Pact had undermined China’s climate strategy (to the extent that there is one) in the region.<sup>57</sup>

In this area, as in others, PICs can use the presence and activity of China as a part of how they seek to exercise leverage over other partners:

*“... a lot of it does come down to just having an ‘other’ ... portraying China as better on climate and better on these issues is a way of shaming Australia and New Zealand into doing more”*[ACA 002]

Although the question we posed was not framed in terms of comparing China with other partners, there was some indication of how respondents saw this as a point of contrast. For example, from our Samoan participant, we heard that people were more likely to think of Australia, the United Nations, New Zealand or Japan as climate “allies” for the Pacific.

### Opportunities and hopes for the future

Across the board, we heard from our participants that there was room for China to make significant contributions in relation to addressing climate change in the Pacific. For example, we heard from one of our Solomon Islands participants that China could engage more actively with the climate change imperatives contained in communiqués released by the PIF.<sup>58</sup>

*“If you look at the magnitude of the problem and the urgency of the problem that we have, politics aside, there’s opportunity to involve China to be a champion”* [REG 003]

Elsewhere, there was hope that high-level interactions had the potential to drive new projects, such as those relating to the use of renewable energy, that would have positive impacts in relation to key climate change issues:

*“There is a lot of scope at the leader-to-leader and ministerial level to get some useful projects happening. I think that’s where there is more likely to be influence”* [ACA 002]

At the regional level, we also heard that there was scope for China to be a more significant partner in relation to climate change issues:

*“China’s footprint in terms of climate change mitigation and adaptation support in the region could be enhanced in the future”*[REG 001]

One opportunity for China to contribute to Pacific-led efforts in meeting the challenges of climate change is the Pacific Resilience Facility (PRF). China has already provided resources to support some of the scoping work for this initiative, and there are hopes that this will be followed by a strong contribution to the initial capitalisation.<sup>59</sup>

China is seen as a site of significant technical expertise. There is scope for increased knowledge transfer in key areas such as the use of renewable energy sources and enhanced meteorological services to support disaster preparedness. In addition, as China increases its soft power engagement by way of university scholarships for Pacific students, there are opportunities to support the development of skills and expertise in climate-focused disciplines:

*“China has a lot to offer in terms of its technical and scientific know-how, and it is conducive to Papua New Guinea and developing countries’ context.”*[PNG 001]

# Conclusions and future questions

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The findings we have presented here indicate that engagement with China in relation to climate change is a diverse concept, as is so often the way in the Pacific islands region. The nature of the engagement differs between different countries, and the way the engagement operates at the regional level is often different again. This is influenced by several factors, including the maturity of given diplomatic relationships, the attitudes that Pacific officials adopt, and the nature of initiatives that may be under consideration. At this particular time, the geostrategic focus on the Pacific islands region intersects with longstanding discourses, creating opportunity and challenge.

The work that we have done here provides a useful platform for the development of future research, which will draw on Pacific perspectives and add to a greater understanding of how the climate crisis is informing critical conversations that have geopolitical drivers and implications.

First, there is room to examine opportunities for greater collaboration and cooperation with China on the part of the USA and other development and security partners. Whilst there is no denying the tensions that exist within the US-China relationship, it is significant to note that addressing climate change was identified as recently as late 2021 as an area in which the leaderships of these countries seek to work together.<sup>60</sup> Given the growing significance of other strategic groupings with an interest in and focus on the Pacific islands region, it is pertinent to note that responding to natural disasters has been identified as an area for potential cooperation with China by Australia and/or New Zealand.<sup>61</sup> It is also noteworthy that the opportunity for 'trilateral cooperation' in support for PICs was mentioned several times during Minister Wang Yi's visit to the region in May 2022 and is identified as an objective of the position paper that was released during that tour.<sup>62</sup> Pacific officials have long been concerned that a lack of coordination on the part of international partners acts as a drain on national systems and leads to an increase in transaction costs.

Secondly, as we have seen with other diplomatic and development partners, Chinese statements relating to the Pacific increasingly reference the "Blue Pacific". This indicates an acknowledgement of the ongoing strategic thinking that is taking place in the region under the leadership of the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat. As this coalesces into the forthcoming 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent, it will be instructive to see how Chinese stakeholders modify their engagements with PICs and regional organisations to align (or otherwise) with objectives and aspirations as they are articulated in that document.

Thirdly, we have made several references to the China-Pacific Islands Climate Change Cooperation Center whose creation was announced further to the virtual meeting of Foreign Ministers in late 2021. A future area of research will be the establishment and operation of this centre, with a particular focus on how its work is informed by Pacific priorities and perceived to address Pacific needs. We anticipate that this will form part of a greater focus on regional engagement by China. There is a need to understand how this intersects with pre-existing and emerging regional and sub-regional architecture.

A fourth area of study that this project has touched on is the military aspects of addressing the challenges of climate change. In a recent address at the University of the South Pacific, the Secretary of the US Navy, Carlos Del-Toro, referenced an increased focus on climate and energy security on the part of US military agencies.<sup>63</sup> Alongside this, there is work ongoing in the HADR space as to how military actors can 'green' their inputs.<sup>64</sup> The contribution of the Chinese navy during the recent response to natural disasters in Tonga marks a change in modality and is one that is likely to be replicated in the future. This opens an area of study as to how this can be accommodated by existing systems and mechanisms at national and regional levels.

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## GRIFFITH ASIA INSTITUTE

Griffith University Nathan campus  
Nathan Queensland 4111, Australia

Email: [gai@griffith.edu.au](mailto:gai@griffith.edu.au)

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