

# Countering Unwelcome Strategic Competitors in the South Pacific

## Canberra's Perspective on the Role of Island States in the Indian and Pacific Islands in Realizing Australia's Indo-Pacific Interests

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### Abstract

The Indo-Pacific concept has become more prominent in Australian strategic thinking, but the embrace of the term in declaratory policy has not been matched operationally. This mismatch is clearly evidenced in the unbalanced approach to the island states of the Indian Ocean and Pacific. The island states of the South Pacific remain a central focus of Australian foreign and defense policies, with increased concerns over geostrategic competition attracting greater attention than issues in the Indian Ocean. Underlying factors, such as Australia's unique strategic culture, explain this continuity in Australian foreign policy and the slow shift to a truly Indo-Pacific outlook. The persistence of high-level threat perceptions and a habitual strategy of denial against unwelcome strategic competitors are evidenced in Canberra's responses to China's attempts to negotiate basing agreements in the South Pacific. This highlights that the thrust of Australian foreign policy is unlikely to radically shift to the Indian Ocean in the medium term.

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While the reinvigoration of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) is attributed to increasing geopolitical competition with China across the Indo-Pacific, Australia remains focused on strategic competition within its immediate region. Australia's relations with island states in the Indo-Pacific are highly skewed toward Pacific Island Countries (PIC), and relations with Indian Ocean states are underdeveloped. Despite a shift in declaratory rhetoric toward operating across the Indo-Pacific, Canberra's strategic outlook remains fixated on Southeast Asia and the South Pacific.

This article begins by identifying Australia's interests in the Indo-Pacific, with respect to island states. This leads to clarification of the role of the Indo-Pacific concept in Australian foreign policy (AFP) and strategic planning in relation to island states. Using the Indo-Pacific moniker as a guide to foreign policy priorities is not unproblematic because, while it has a maritime focus that aligned with

Canberra's strategic outlook, Australia's interests were concentrated in the Pacific rather than Indian Oceans. Therefore, despite much commentary about the significance of the creation of a new regional moniker in Australian declaratory policy, it has not equated to a wholesale shift in operational policy. This apparent tension in high-level strategic guidance points to the need to analyze other underlying drivers of policy, namely Australia's unique strategic culture and the longstanding role of strategic denial in considerations of relations with island states. The contention is that underlying drivers of foreign policy have elevated the threat from China and consequently increased concern over geostrategic competition in the South Pacific has diminished the potential for greater cooperation with the island states of the Indian Ocean.

Military basing is used as a case study to illustrate the argument in relation to Fiji, Papua New Guinea (PNG), the Solomon Islands (Solomons), Vanuatu, and Sri Lanka. The case study highlights the intersection of Australian and Chinese interests in the Pacific that are presently framed as part of the broader Indo-Pacific strategic rivalry, but which for Australia have had a longstanding and habitual historical basis in strategic culture. The case also identifies the role of PICs in achieving Australia's strategic interests and in particular the agency of PIC leaders in leveraging strategic rivalry to suit their national interests (interests which were not located in the geopolitical sphere). The case also highlights the very shallow presence in AFP of Indian Ocean versus South Pacific island states, which therefore form the focus of this article.

### **Australia's Indo-Pacific Interests and Island States**

Continuity is a core attribute of Australia's regional interests. Since the Indo-Pacific concept became a central part of framing Australia's interests in the mid-2010s, *stability* and *order* have been the watchwords in AFP. Foreign Affairs and Defence declaratory policy have consistently elevated the importance of maintaining regional stability and the status quo in the face of the rise of China—the prescription being a gradual and predictable integration of China's expanding interests in the region. For example, the *2017 Foreign Policy White Paper* identified that “The Indo-Pacific's stability depends more than ever on the actions of, and relations between, two of Australia's most important partners—the United States and China.” More pointedly, it noted, “We encourage China to exercise its power in a way that enhances stability, reinforces international law and respects the interests of smaller countries and their right to pursue them peacefully.”<sup>1</sup>

In the context of China's militarization of the South China Sea, Canberra has focused on the maintenance of the “rules-based order,”<sup>2</sup> which approximated protecting the international political, economic, and legal status quo. Canberra has

bandwagoned with like-minded democracies, such as India and the United States, to protect the status quo, and this is best evidenced in the reinvigoration of the Quad. Canberra has also maintained its longstanding focus on the strategic denial of unwelcome strategic competitors from its immediate region, and perceptions of increased Chinese influence in the South Pacific have led to a Pacific policy “Step-up.”<sup>3</sup> Both the maintenance of the status quo order and strategic denial were not new, but greater emphasis on the South Pacific has not been matched by efforts in the Indian Ocean, and this highlights how greater analysis of the role of the Indo-Pacific concept in AFP is warranted.

### **The Indo-Pacific Concept and Australia’s Foreign Policy toward Island States in the Indian and Pacific Oceans**

The *Indo-Pacific* is a relatively new concept in Australian strategic thinking. The extent to which it actually guides AFP is questionable, and this ambiguity is directly relevant to relations with island states in the Indian and Pacific Oceans. The concept has the promise to do more than simply extend the previous *Asia-Pacific* nomenclature to the west into South Asia and the Indian Ocean. The economic character of the previous regional label that framed AFP from the Hawke and Keating governments in the late 1980s and 1990s was clear from the fact that geographic focus on the Asia-Pacific was on Australia’s key trading partners in Southeast and then North Asia.<sup>4</sup> During this timeframe, the locus of Australia’s trade with Asia shifted from Southeast to Northeast Asia, and then more recently concentrated on China. Simultaneously, the assumption that China would liberalize as it grew was found to be wanting;<sup>5</sup> so, by the 2010s, Canberra found that its major trading partner was also increasingly becoming a strategic competitor.

The Australian government’s emphasis on trade with Asia meant that the Pacific element of *Asia-Pacific* concept was not emphasized.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, when Canberra did focus on the Pacific it was the *South* Pacific rather than North Pacific—the latter of which Australian policy makers viewed as a US domain. This geographic emphasis aligned with post-World War II strategic planning, whereby Australia (and New Zealand) were assigned responsibility for maintaining strategically vital sea lanes of communication (SLOC) between the continental United States and Australia.<sup>7</sup> These responsibilities contributed to Canberra’s focus on strategic denial and shaped Australia’s force structure.<sup>8</sup> By the time of the *2020 Strategic Update*, the South Pacific was treated as “the region in which Australia needs to be capable of leading military operations.”<sup>9</sup> Notably this emphasis has never been claimed in relation to the Indian Ocean. These issues will be developed in subsequent sections and the military basing case study.

Past practice led to the question as to what extent Canberra will emphasize the South Pacific in its Indo-Pacific strategy,<sup>10</sup> and it appeared that the situation had reversed. The South Pacific had risen in strategic importance in Canberra since the Asia-Pacific moniker was coined in the 1990s, and in the 2020s, it was the *Indo* aspect of the Indo-Pacific that was underdeveloped in regards to relations with island states. However, the reversal in focus was not necessarily due to the existence of the new regional moniker guiding AFP but rather to an intensification of strategic rivalry with China in the South Pacific.<sup>11</sup>

The *2013 Defence White Paper* identified the Indo-Pacific as important to Australian strategic thinking, but the implications for operational policy were ill-defined. The concept was elevated in declaratory policy through the *2016 Defence White Paper*, which highlighted the shift to a maritime strategy and the *2017 Foreign Policy White Paper* that emphasized the core interest of protecting the “rules-based order” in the Indo-Pacific.<sup>12</sup> In fact, in the latter policy document, the Indo-Pacific moniker was mentioned approximately 80 times in relation to most aspects of AFP. Previously the potential of South Asia and the Indian Ocean had been mentioned in passing in government policy statements and by analysts alike,<sup>13</sup> but this potential had not been matched by significant government initiatives in this realm, barring the first iteration of the Quad, which unraveled under pressure from China in 2008.<sup>14</sup> In fact, despite the promise contained in these declaratory statements, security relations between Australia and South Asian and Indian Ocean states evolved slowly at best, and evidently this lack of emphasis was mutual.

The *2017 Foreign Policy White Paper* firmly connected the aim of protecting the “rules-based order” with maintaining a strong US alliance. This white paper noted that Australia’s “vision for a neighbourhood” involved “adherence to rules” and that “Our alliance with the United States is central to Australia’s approach to the Indo-Pacific . . . and to support a balance in the Indo-Pacific favourable to our interests and promote an open, inclusive and rules-based region, Australia will also work more closely with the region’s major democracies.”<sup>15</sup> This renewed interest in the region led to the focus on reinvigorating the Quad, rather than any significant activities with Indian Ocean island states.<sup>16</sup> However, despite the emphasis in declaratory policy on *rules-based order*, this term was problematic to define,<sup>17</sup> and, as with the Indo-Pacific moniker, it was also difficult to identify operationally in AFP. In fact, there were solid grounds on which to question Canberra’s commitment to a rules-based order in relation to emerging international norms on climate change or the long-standing respect for fundamental human rights.<sup>18</sup> What was not debatable was that a particular type of order supported by the United States and like-minded partners was what Canberra craved, and this desire was firmly rooted in Australian strategic culture.

By contrast to the use of the previous regional descriptor of the Asia-Pacific, Canberra's embrace of the Indo-Pacific was of a maritime concept, and it was one that had the potential to consolidate Australia's maritime strategy in the Pacific and Indian Oceans.<sup>19</sup> As such, this formal extension in the identification of an area of primary strategic concern to the west coincided with the shift in usage in US policy circles.<sup>20</sup> It also aligned Australian strategy with the US shift from a Pacific to an Indo-Pacific command of military forces in the region in 2018. The Trump administration's *Indo-Pacific Strategy* cemented this shift for the United States, and Biden has reinforced this focus.<sup>21</sup>

As such, in AFP the Indo-Pacific should be viewed primarily as a strategic concept in relation to China's (and subsequently Russia's) challenge to the status-quo order,<sup>22</sup> where the earlier focus on the Asia-Pacific was primarily economic (and, as noted, largely overlooked the South Pacific unless disorder or disaster struck). For Canberra, the rise of the Indo-Pacific moniker coincided with increasing diplomatic tension and strategic competition with China and reflected a willingness to bandwagon with other like-minded democracies and its "great and powerful friend," the United States.<sup>23</sup> This approach reflected an essential element of Australia's strategic culture, which will be discussed in the following section. However, beyond the identification of high-level strategic goals aligned with the United States, Australia's Indo-Pacific strategy was difficult to define leading respected commentators to question whether it was "illusory."<sup>24</sup>

The drivers behind the adoption of the Indo-Pacific moniker and the recency of the geographic shift were reflected in the contrasting nature of relationships that Australia had with Indian Ocean island states and PICs. The South Pacific has been a central area of strategic concern for Canberra since before federation in 1901,<sup>25</sup> while almost no strategic relations existed or have been developed with island states of the Indian Ocean, other than Timor Leste which is treated similarly to South Pacific states. That is, Australia has very little strategic, diplomatic, economic, or cultural links with Comoros, Madagascar, Maldives, Mauritius, Seychelles, and Sri Lanka. The Indian Ocean itself is mentioned in the past three white papers and strategic guidance documents, but it has largely been focused on Indian Ocean rim states or trade routes. From a bilateral standpoint, only Sri Lanka is mentioned in these documents—and only twice in very general terms. However, from a domestic political standpoint, asylum seekers from Sri Lanka's civil war did become an issue in Australia in the late 2000s. The one notable situation where a strategic issue from the island states of the Indian Ocean became an issue for Australia was when the Chinese gained ownership of the Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka in 2017. However, rather than Canberra acting in relation to Sri Lanka in

the sense of Indo-Pacific strategic rivalry, the example was applied negatively to PICs, and this will be discussed in detail as a case study later in this article.

While not an island state, Diego Garcia, does feature in Australia's strategic thinking due to the importance of the US base and the equipment prepositioned there. The United Kingdom administers Diego Garcia and leases it to the United States, and there is pressure from Mauritius to regain control over the Chagos Archipelago, of which Diego Garcia is a part. The UN and International court of Justice support Mauritius' claim and have called for the UK to decolonize Diego Garcia as quickly as possible.<sup>26</sup> Canberra has been silent on this issue highlighting the limits of Canberra's commitment to supporting a rules-based order when the issue conflicts with Australian concerns in supporting US strategic interests, which is a key element of strategic culture.<sup>27</sup>

When Canberra looks west, the focus has mostly centered on India's role and potential in the Indo-Pacific power struggle, and the emphasis was nascent at best with respect to Australia's relations with Indian Ocean island states that may be viewed as strategically peripheral. Due to Canberra's overwhelming focus on PICs rather than Indian Ocean island states, how this region supports Canberra in realizing Australia's national interests will form the focal point of the remainder of this article.

### **Strategic Denial, Strategic Culture, and Threat Perceptions**

The strategic denial of unwelcome competitors in Australia's immediate region was ingrained in Australia's foreign and defense policies. Strategic denial is an approach that has been mentioned either directly or indirectly in every significant Australian policy statement since World War II, with the emphasis growing over time. For example, the *2016 Defence White Paper* noted, "Instability in our immediate region could have strategic consequences for Australia should it lead to increasing influence by actors from outside the region with interests inimical to ours."<sup>28</sup> This theme has gathered strength over time, and in the *2020 Strategic Update* the prescription for deterring and defeating foreign forces in the immediate region was "strengthening sovereignty and resilience to coercion . . . [and] developing capabilities to hold adversary forces and infrastructure at risk further from Australia."<sup>29</sup> Canberra's sensitivity to foreign interference in what prime ministers (PM) regularly term Australia's *backyard* or *patch* can be explained through Australia's unique strategic culture.

In his seminal work on superpower behavior during the Cold War, Carl Jacobson defined *strategic culture* as "a distinctive and lasting set of beliefs, values and habits regarding the threat and use of force, which have their roots in such fundamental influences as geopolitical setting, history and political culture."<sup>30</sup> Graeme

Cheeseman, a significant Australian strategic studies academic, was a key proponent of applying the concept to Australia, and he focused on the enduring impact of the colonial era, the failed decolonization of a “white” settler society in a distinctly Asian region, and the threat perceptions that developed as a result of this historical experience.<sup>31</sup> As such Australia’s strategic culture can be defined as:

- Celebration of its foundational Anglo culture;
- Heightened threat perceptions focused on alienation from the Asian region of which it does not feel a part; and,
- A sense of indefensibility arising from a potent mix of threat perceptions, isolation from Anglo-American allies, and a large land mass to be defended by a small population.<sup>32</sup>

The foundations of Australia’s underlying strategic culture can be identified in high-level threat perceptions, which were often exaggerated by a deep sense of geographic isolation and politico-cultural alienation. The first such example being the invasion scare in the Australian colonies in the 1850s prompted by the distant Crimean War,<sup>33</sup> and the trend continues to this day with respect to China. An enduring aspect of Australia’s strategic culture is cultural alienation from the region in which Australia is geographically located but does not belong (Asia and the Pacific, and now the Indo-Pacific) and cultural and political isolation from distant states that Canberra defined as possessing shared history and democratic values and being able to support it against a potential threat emanating from Asia. Originally the United Kingdom was identified as Australia’s “great and powerful friend,” but as Britain declined during World War II, the United States was identified as Australia’s savior.<sup>34</sup> These threat perceptions were born out of the white settler experience in relation to Australia’s indigenous people and the unfamiliar foreboding environment, both of which were perceived as alien and had to be tamed.<sup>35</sup> Once this initial task of “nation” building was underway, threat perceptions expanded to include first the European empires and their possessions in Asia and then Asian empires and states. During the Cold War, an ideological overlay was placed on the threat, making it even more “alien” insofar as Australia firmly supported the Western alliance while many Asian states were identified as being part of the threat of international Communism through the domino theory.<sup>36</sup>

The elevated threat perceptions that are central to Australia’s strategic culture have had a profound impact on AFP. When triggered by an external event, such as the fall of Singapore in 1942, the terrorist attacks on the United States on 11 September 2001, or the announcement of a Chinese security agreement with the Solomons in 2022, Canberra has responded comprehensively and in a manner that may be viewed as contrary to other core interests. As such, while maximizing trade op-

portunities generally dominated Canberra's international outlook, when it was perceived that an existential threat presented itself, AFP pivoted to meet the challenge—even if doing so was not in Australia's economic interests. This explained the apparent contradiction with respect to relations with China, which had long been and remains Australia's major trading partner, but in the 2020s was openly identified as its major strategic rival.

How PICs fit into Canberra's strategy of denial in the face of a strategic challenge to Australia's interests can be evidenced in the issue of Chinese basing. However, it must be noted that concern over foreign influence in the Pacific is not new but rather a continuation of a long-standing trend, which fits with the enduring character of strategic culture. During the Cold War in the 1980s, Canberra expressed concern over Soviet attempts at negotiating "fishing agreements" with PICs as such pacts were viewed as facilitating spying.<sup>37</sup> More recently, in 2016, Russia provided military equipment to Fiji, which also set off alarm bells, and Australia offered Bushmaster infantry mobility vehicles (IMV) to Fiji to cement the post-coup relationship.<sup>38</sup>

### **The Threat of Foreign Bases in the South Pacific: A Case Study**

Canberra has consistently acted pragmatically to engineer a position whereby PICs view Australia as their security partner of choice.<sup>39</sup> Canberra has confirmed this role numerous times by acting decisively in the case of breaches in regional order (such as coups or other cases of domestic instability) and natural disasters (most notably in response to the cyclones that regularly devastate PICs). In relation to maintaining order, Canberra has long been concerned with state fragility, which led to the use of the term *Arc of Instability* to refer to the Indonesian archipelago and Pacific islands to Australia's east.<sup>40</sup> Operationally, this concern is epitomized by the decade long Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI) military and policing operation, which was bankrolled by Australian taxpayers at a cost over AUD 2.5 billion.<sup>41</sup>

As geopolitical tension with China increased in the 2010s so did Canberra's concern about Chinese influence in the region. For example, the *2020 Strategic Update* noted that "Australia is concerned by the potential for actions, such as the establishment of military bases, which could undermine stability in the Indo-Pacific and our immediate region."<sup>42</sup> Worst-case scenarios that reflect the threat perceptions inherent in Australian strategic culture have dominated analysis and commentary of Chinese activities in the Pacific. As one respected analyst put it, "Chinese-owned ports and airports could eventually facilitate a forward presence for the PLA Navy and Air Force in the maritime air approaches to Australia's



eastern seaboard. That would fundamentally change our strategic circumstances for the worse as key population centres would come under direct threat in wartime.”<sup>43</sup>

However, there are numerous variables that will limit whether this wartime scenario comes to pass, and no discussion of the credibility of this sort of threat was included in analyses. This highlights the high-level threat perceptions that naturally permeate Australian strategic culture. Furthermore, the agency of Solomon Islands’ leaders was also underexplored, and this is a recurrent theme in relation to analysis that treats the South Pacific as a potential battleground rather than an area populated by Pacific Islanders with their own interests.<sup>44</sup> PIC leaders did not necessarily share Canberra’s militarized view of the South Pacific; for example, in responding to the apparent return of a version of Cold War bipolarity, then-Samoan Prime Minister Tuilaepa Malielegaoi observed that “their enemies are not our enemies.”<sup>45</sup>

There have been many rumors of China negotiating basing agreements that did not eventuate, as in Vanuatu in 2018, or were openly thwarted by Canberra, as in PNG and Fiji in 2019, where Australia funded building bases. The strategic game changer came in 2022 in the Solomon Islands and coincided with an election campaign in Australia, which ensured that the issue would be more politicized than might have otherwise been the case.

Before detailing the cases two contextual points must be noted. First, it is clear from numerous credible leaks that Canberra has excellent intelligence of diplomacy in regional capitals; therefore, tentative statements by government officials belie significant concerns.<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, government press releases and leaks that referred to intelligence from often unnamed sources were regularly reported in the Australian media, which highlighted the connection between the threat perceptions that characterize strategic culture and public opinion. Second, these case studies only connect Australia’s interests in the South Pacific with the Indian Ocean with respect to the means by which China gained ownership of the Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka. The impact of “debt-trap” diplomacy in Sri Lanka was referred to repeatedly as an example of how the situation could evolve in the South Pacific.<sup>47</sup>

### ***Vanuatu 2018: A Base Thwarted?***

In April 2018 Australian media broke the news that China was negotiating an access agreement to establish a naval base in Vanuatu. The story was based on leaked sources, presumably from within the Australian government and/or intelligence sources and identified the ramifications of the base as a “globally significant move that could see the rising superpower sail warships on Australia’s doorstep.”<sup>48</sup> The strategic commentary used the example of the Hambantota Port

in Sri Lanka to speculate about the scenario that could play out: “A Beijing-funded wharf in Vanuatu that is struggling to make money is big enough to allow powerful warships to dock alongside it, heightening fears the port could be converted into a Chinese naval installation.”<sup>49</sup>

The news of the proposed base identified that the base would represent a breach in Australia’s long-standing strategy of denial that is characteristic of Australia’s strategic culture.<sup>50</sup> Then-Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull expressed “grave” concern<sup>51</sup> and used megaphone diplomacy that expressed the importance of strategic denial: “We would view with great concern the establishment of any foreign military bases in those Pacific Island countries and neighbours of ours.”<sup>52</sup> Using this form of megaphone diplomacy was not uncommon in Canberra—and was not welcomed in the Pacific—but was a testament to what PM Scott Morrison would later identify in relation to the Solomons as “red lines” that Canberra did not want crossed.<sup>53</sup>

At the time the Vanuatu and Chinese governments were at pains to deny the story and treated it as an unsubstantiated rumor focused on an innocuous wharf redevelopment. However, the authoritative statements by the Australian PM and numerous leaks to the Australian press highlighted that Canberra treated the threat as very real. Presuming that the proposal was real, that it did not go ahead was testament to the success of Canberra’s lobbying, and this highlighted the role of the Vanuatu government in achieving Australia’s interests, but as we will see, this situation was reversed in the case of the Solomon Islands in 2022. Meanwhile rumors persisted, as did the analysis, such as in the case of Samoa, where it was argued that a rumored port development “could lead to a ‘salient right through the heart’ of America’s defences in the South Pacific or threaten Australia’s east-coast trade routes to the US.”<sup>54</sup>

### ***Fiji 2018–2019: Australia and PICs Working Together and Outmaneuvering China***

The importance of PICs in achieving Canberra’s interests was on display in the case of both the Manus Island Naval Base in PNG and the Blackrock Peacekeeping & Humanitarian Assistance & Disaster Relief Camp (Blackrock Camp) in Fiji.<sup>55</sup> In the interests of brevity, the latter will be the focus of this example of Australian competition with China.

A rapprochement occurred between Australia and Fiji in the mid-2010s after years of sanctions imposed after Commodore Frank Bainimarama’s coup in 2006.<sup>56</sup> Canberra was keen to redevelop the formerly well-established military diplomacy ties, while the Fijian military was more circumspect. Support for the

Cyclone Winston disaster and recovery response in 2016 was welcomed, and Australia's provision of 14 Bushmaster IMVs to Fiji's military in 2017 along with patrol boats to all PICs further cemented Australia's credentials as the security partner of choice.

When rumors surfaced of China's willingness to support Fiji in the redevelopment of its Blackrock Camp, the Australian response was swift. For Australian commentators the point of competition was clear: the title of the article that broke the story was "Australia Beats China to Funding Fiji Base," and the text noted that Australia "outbid China to secure the rights as the sole foreign donor."<sup>57</sup> In contrast to China's perceived intentions, Australia was not searching for a base for its own forces but rather to provide facilities for Fijian (and regional ) peacekeepers, while also denying China a foothold.

Commentary and analysis of Australia's support for Fiji's Blackrock Camp highlighted the urgency of strategic denial in Australia's policy. However, the agency of Fijian leaders in using geopolitical competition to support their interests is underestimated in the narrative. In this case there is no doubt that China was negotiating with Fiji, but Australia provided a package of support including infrastructure, through life support and training, which was more attractive to the Fijian military. Furthermore, the Fijian leaders were interested in cementing ties after the long coup years. So, Australia may have "won" against China, but it is Fiji that provided the victory. We will see below, that in relation to the Chinese regional security agreement this influence of PIC leaders in supporting Australia's achievement of its Indo-Pacific interests is also evident.

### ***The "Loss" of the Solomons to China in 2022***

When news broke that China was negotiating a base in the Solomon Islands in early 2022, the Australian government had reason to believe that these plans could be thwarted. This assumption was reasonable given the previous history in Vanuatu, PNG, and Fiji and previous diplomacy with the Solomons. For example, in 2018 Canberra was able to reverse an agreement for China to install a submarine cable to Honiara,<sup>58</sup> which was followed by an offer of AUD 260 million in development assistance for special projects when Prime Minister Morrison visited the Solomons in June 2019. Public commentary characterized this as being designed "to Stave Off China's Pacific Growth."<sup>59</sup>

China moved quickly under the cover of an election campaign in Australia to secure an agreement. In a classic example of megaphone diplomacy the PM noted that a Chinese base would present a geostrategic red line for Australia.<sup>60</sup> However, despite the deliberations being leaked before signing and significant pressure being applied from Australia and the United States, an agreement was signed in

April 2022. Despite the frenetic Australian diplomacy, Washington was concerned enough to let its preferences be known directly to the Solomon's government. For example, Kurt Campbell, Pres. Joe Biden's Indo-Pacific coordinator, made a lightning visit to Honiara to try to derail the agreement. US commentators, such as Charles Edel from the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, DC, warned that a base would be "deeply problematic for the United States and a real cause of concern for our allies and partners."<sup>61</sup>

The Solomons access agreement could be considered a loss for Australia, and that is certainly the dominant view in the commentary and analysis. However, this is based on the worst-case scenario of events that are yet to occur and may never ensue. It is assumed that a military base with the capacity to directly threaten Australia and/or SLOCs between Australia and the United States is the natural progression from the agreement. There are numerous other scenarios that are more likely, and all of these will involve aligning the agency of PIC leaders with Australia's strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific—a task that will consume policy makers and diplomats for some time to come.

### **PIC Agency and Australian Foreign Policy Interests in the Indo-Pacific**

That Canberra has been able to maintain the South Pacific as an "Australian lake" since World War II is testament to the priority afforded to strategic denial. However, the criticisms of the American description of the Pacific as an "American Lake"<sup>62</sup> also apply to Australia because focusing on the area as an arena for strategic competition undermines the sovereignty and agency of the very Pacific Islanders needed to realize Australia's interests.

The close military-diplomatic relationship with Fiji and PNG was on display in the frenetic diplomacy surrounding the China–Solomons base deal in 2022. This diplomatic collaboration in support of Australian (and US) security interests highlights that PIC leaders have been adept in supporting the strategic interests of external powers while delivering public goods to their people via the largess of donors competing for influence. This dynamic was best evidenced by significant divisions over climate change between the PICs and Australia, where Canberra was often able to achieve its strategic interests despite significant disagreements over environmental issues.

In the parlance of Cold War bipolarity, the Morrison government was seen to 'lose' the Solomons to China. The change of government in Australia in May 2022 saw the incoming government double down with initiatives that aligned closely with strategic culture. The incoming prime minister, Anthony Albanese,

and foreign minister, Penny Wong, travelled to Tokyo for a Quad meeting before the election results were even finalized, which highlighted the maintenance of a commitment to the rules-based order. Furthermore, Wong then traveled to the South Pacific to coincide with a visit by the Chinese foreign minister, whose agenda included securing PICs to sign a regional security agreement that would cement China's success in the Solomons. Wong's urgent trip four days into her candidature sent all the right signals to PIC leaders about respecting sovereignty and agency, warned of the destabilizing impact of a new agreement, promised more aid, and, most significantly, highlighted the new government's commitment to tackle climate change,<sup>63</sup> which the Morrison government stubbornly refused to do. PIC leaders, wary of bringing a new cold war to the Pacific, thwarted the Chinese regional security agreement, reinforcing Australia's role as the status quo security partner of choice. Australian public opinion strongly supported the incoming government's stance on China's activities in the South Pacific, and the Solomons basing agreement in particular, as the issue was also prominent in the 2022 'Khaki' election.<sup>64</sup> This highlights how deeply ingrained strategic culture is in Australia's psyche.

## **Conclusion**

To date the Indo-Pacific moniker has had greater declaratory than operational impact in Australian strategic planning and foreign policy. Nonetheless it is clear that the concept was designed to align diplomacy with the United States and like-minded states in the face of perceptions of an increasing threat from China. As such, the rise of Quad 2.0 is a prime example of how the Indo-Pacific moniker can assist in coalescing states that share concerns about China's impact on the rules-based order. This defense of the status quo that so benefits Quad members is a key element of Australia's twenty-first-century strategic outlook. The shared defense of the rules-based order forms the latest iteration of a long connection between Australia and the United States that became institutionalized through alliance after World War II. The fact that strategic order and the US alliance are so intertwined must be seen as an essential attribute of Australia's strategic culture, and this has long shaped how Australia relates to PICs.

Since before Federation in 1901, Australia has practiced the strategic denial of unwelcome competitors in its immediate region. This strategy is so ubiquitous that it has become an enduring element in Australia's strategic culture. Australia's outlook has involved high-level threat perceptions throughout peace time, and this is also a key element in strategic culture. Furthermore, this relates more to threats emanating from or through Asia and the South Pacific than through its

Indian Ocean approaches, and this partially explains the lack of emphasis placed on relations with Indian Ocean island states.

Chinese influence in the Pacific fits into a broader pattern of geopolitical rivalry across the Indo-Pacific. However, it is Chinese activities in the South Pacific that have piqued the interest of Australian policy makers, strategists, and commentators, and this theater in a new cold war has been the focus of Australian foreign and defense policies. Little emphasis has been placed on Indian Ocean island states, and for Canberra the *Indo* aspect of the Indo-Pacific has concentrated on the Quad.

China's military basing intentions are a litmus test for Beijing's influence in the Pacific and have been a key focus of AFP since rumors surfaced in relation to Vanuatu in 2018. In relation to the Solomons basing agreement, US concern in its backyard piqued Canberra's interest in both strategic denial of unwelcome actors but also Australia's responsibility for maintaining stability in the South Pacific to pay its alliance dues to the United States, which is another important element of strategic culture. Canberra will continue to prioritize countering unwelcome strategic competitors in the South Pacific, and this is likely to constrain initiatives in the Indian Ocean area. 🌐

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#### Notes

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