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# Statecraftiness: The need for proactive rather than reactive statecraft in the Pacific Islands

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# Introduction

The accepted orthodoxy in Canberra is that Australia should use ‘all tools of statecraft’ to advance its foreign and strategic policy.<sup>1</sup>

The 2023 *Defence Strategic Review* included a section devoted to ‘statecraft’ and recommended that the Australian government ‘harness all elements of national power to protect Australia’s strategic interests’.<sup>2</sup> The 2023 *International Development Policy* similarly called on the government to ‘improve the integration of development with other tools of statecraft’.<sup>3</sup>

Australia is directing many of its tools of statecraft to the Pacific Islands region, the security of which it has long identified is second in importance only to its own. The Australian government perceives that growing strategic competition—between, on the one hand, the United States (US) and its allies and partners (including Australia, New Zealand, France, Japan), and on the other hand, China—has the potential to threaten both regional and Australia’s security.

Long the Pacific Islands region’s major donor, security partner, and humanitarian and disaster relief provider, Australia has enhanced its regional policy since 2018.

<sup>1</sup>See: Pat Conroy, ‘Ministerial Statement’ in Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade [DFAT] (2023), *Australia’s International Development Policy: For a Peaceful, Stable and Prosperous Indo-Pacific*, Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, p. 4.

<sup>2</sup>Australian Government (2023) *National Defence: Defence Strategic Review*, Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, <https://www.defence.gov.au/about/reviews-inquiries/defence-strategic-review> p. 33.

<sup>3</sup>DFAT (2023), *Australia’s International Development Policy*, p. 8.

This ‘step-up’ has included efforts to provide infrastructure funding, expand security partnerships, and develop people-to-people links.

A range of other ‘traditional’ and ‘emerging’ partners have also increased their policy focus on the region through various means. This means that the geopolitical landscape has become increasingly ‘crowded and complex’.<sup>4</sup>

Many of these activities have been welcomed, particularly as much of the region has extensive development needs. But the risk is that, with all the increasingly urgent energy being directed to the region, it may make targeting and coordination difficult, especially as cooperative initiatives between partners, such as the Partners in the Blue Pacific, are nascent and do not yet fully engage existing Pacific mechanisms. This is partly because partners have not had an overarching clear picture of exactly who is doing what, and where, in the region.

To help better understand what partners are doing, our project has mapped what tools of statecraft are being deployed by which partners, and where, within the Pacific Islands region. Full results are available on our interactive online StoryMap.<sup>5</sup>

Based on our analysis, we find that, when the whole-of-government statecraft of Australia and its allies and partners is mapped they do a lot in the region. Australia’s role across and within the Pacific Islands region is much larger than that of any other partner state. Australia and its partners are justifiably concerned about the strategic consequences of China’s increasingly visible presence. But our findings suggest that they have the breathing space to shift from reacting to each Chinese announcement or initiative towards calm, considered, proactive statecraft that anticipates and responds both to their interests and those of the Pacific Island region.

We therefore recommend that Australia and other partner states:

1. distinguish between *correlation* and *causation* when seeking to determine the effectiveness of partner states’ deployment of statecraft tools;
2. acknowledge that the *quantity* of statecraft tools being deployed in the Pacific Islands region does not necessarily equate to their *quality* or effectiveness in generating influence;
3. analyse the deployment of tools of statecraft in *relative*, rather than *absolute*, terms. It is easy to draw incorrect – at times, alarming – conclusions when one partner’s activities are considered in isolation from others. But when partners states’ activities are analysed in comparison to each other, a more accurate picture emerges;
4. analyse the deployment of tools of statecraft over the *long*, rather than the *short*, term. Too much focus on contemporaneous events obscures the importance of long-term trends;
5. distinguish between the *announcement* and *implementation* of tools of statecraft. The importance of the announcement of an initiative is often over-interpreted, which overlooks that implementation often does not happen – or happens in unanticipated ways; and
6. acknowledge the difficulty of identifying the partner state that is the source or deployer of tools of statecraft due to out-sourcing through international organisations, civil society, and international financial institutions.

With these recommendations in mind, we argue that Australia and other partner states should ensure that their deployment of tools of statecraft in the Pacific Islands region is *proactive* rather than *reactive*. Reactions are reflexive, quick, and provide little time for deliberation or consideration of the consequences. They are consequently usually based on assumptions and driven primarily by emotion, such as fear or anger, leading to the ‘whack-a-mole’ nature of some recent policymaking towards the Pacific Islands region. In contrast, being proactive provides time for consideration, seeking information, and then calm, considered, rational evaluation.

<sup>4</sup>Pacific Islands Forum, Boe Declaration on Regional Security, 2018; Joanne Wallis, *Crowded and Complex: The changing geopolitics of the South Pacific*, Canberra: Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 2017.

<sup>5</sup>Joanne Wallis and Michael Rose, ‘Statecraftiness: Mapping Statecraft in the Pacific Islands’, Stretton Institute, University of Adelaide: Adelaide, <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/b047ee4be82e47a8a6f3e580cf688d40>.

# Distinguish between *correlation* and *causation*

Any assessment of the effectiveness of individual statecraft tools needs to acknowledge that there is often no direct causal line between the deployment of a tool of statecraft and the advancement of a partner state's policy.

Instead, we understand that statecraft describes actions that states take to *try* to change three factors that determine the success of their foreign and strategic policy: (a) their external environment; (b) the policies and/or behaviour of target states, actors, communities, and/or individuals; and/or (c) the beliefs, attitudes, and/or opinions of target states, actors, communities, and/or individuals.<sup>6</sup>

The converse is also often true: correlation between, for example, the deployment of tools of statecraft by a partner state and a change in the policies and/or behaviour of a Pacific Island country does not necessarily mean that one caused the other. The deployment of statecraft tools does not generate unilinear effects. Whether attempts to influence by partner states are successful is ultimately determined by the receptivity of Pacific Island countries and the policies and behaviour of Pacific Island countries are determined primarily by domestic political imperatives. Responses to attempts to influence policies and behaviour are mediated by Pacific Island countries' governments, 'which each possess agency and operate within unique political structures and sociopolitical cultures'.<sup>7</sup>

For example, at first blush an analysis of the military presence of the US, France, and Australia in the Pacific Islands region illustrated on our StoryMap might suggest that these partner states have been able to effectively change the behaviour and beliefs of host Pacific Island countries in their favour.





But this overlooks that many of these bases are in colonial territories which do not have a choice about hosting bases. Indeed, Guam continues to be colonised by the US because of its strategic location, yet the biggest threat perceived by CHamoru people is that Guam will be in the firing line if US-China competition escalates to conflict.<sup>8</sup> Other weapons testing sites and planned bases are in states with Compacts of Free Association with the US, which have to factor in that they receive much-needed US funding, migration access, and security guarantees in exchange for hosting them.

Indeed, many Pacific Island countries and peoples are critical of increased militarisation. Residents of the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI), Kiribati, and French Polynesia live with the displacement and intergenerational trauma of nuclear testing;<sup>9</sup> Solomon Islanders still die from unexploded ordinances left behind after the Second World War;<sup>10</sup> and Pacific peoples have a long memory of what war meant for their countries, whether it was battles, or displacement.<sup>11</sup>

More recently, while the US has managed to get Papua New Guinea (PNG) to agree to a defence cooperation agreement that will facilitate the deployment of American military assets, this agreement is unpopular domestically as it is perceived to 'draw PNG into the militarisation of the region'.<sup>12</sup> There are concerns that the agreement violates PNG's long membership of the Non-Alignment Movement, and the constitutionality of potential immunities granted to American personnel is now the subject of a court challenge. Similarly, the Australia-Vanuatu security agreement signed in late 2022 has been unpopular with both the government and opposition, and was cited as a contributing factor to the successful vote of no-confidence in then-Prime Minister Ishmael Kalsakau.<sup>13</sup> The opposition felt that 'such a security pact with Australia undermined the country's long-standing position in the region of non-alignment, with all partners including China always accorded the same treatment'.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>6</sup>Joanne Wallis, Henrietta McNeill, Alan Tidwell, and Czeslaw Tubilewicz (2022) *Statecraftiness: weaving webs of statecraft in the Pacific Islands*. Adelaide Papers on Pacific Security, University of Adelaide. <https://www.adelaide.edu.au/stretton/ua/media/665/statecraftiness.pdf>

<sup>7</sup>Wallis, McNeill, Tidwell, and Tubilewicz, *Statecraftiness*. p. 11.

<sup>8</sup>Kenneth Gofigan Kuper (2020, 21 June) Living at the tip of the spear: Guam and restraint. *Responsible Statecraft*. <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2020/07/20/living-at-the-tip-of-the-spear-guam-and-restraint/>

<sup>9</sup>Teresa K Teaiwa (1994) Bikinis and Other S/pacific N/ oceans. *The Contemporary Pacific* 6(1): 87–109.

<sup>10</sup>Tarcisius Kabutaulaka (2022, 18 November) War Games, UXO And Tragedies In The Solomon Islands. *Honolulu Civil Beat*. <https://www.civilbeat.org/2022/11/war-games-uxo-and-tragedies-in-the-solomon-islands/>

<sup>11</sup>Maima Koro (2023) *Relational Security: Ethical Dilemmas of Geopolitics in the Blue Pacific Continent*. Asia Pacific Leadership Network. <https://cms.apln.network/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Maima-Koro-August-2023.pdf>

<sup>12</sup>Koroi Hawkins (2023, 17 May) Concerns in Papua New Guinea over framing of US security pact. *RNZ News*. <https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/489999/concerns-in-papua-new-guinea-over-framing-of-us-security-pact>; Donald Nangoi (2023, 18 May) O'Neill cautions: Be careful. *Post Courier*. <https://www.postcourier.com.pg/oneill-cautions-be-careful/>

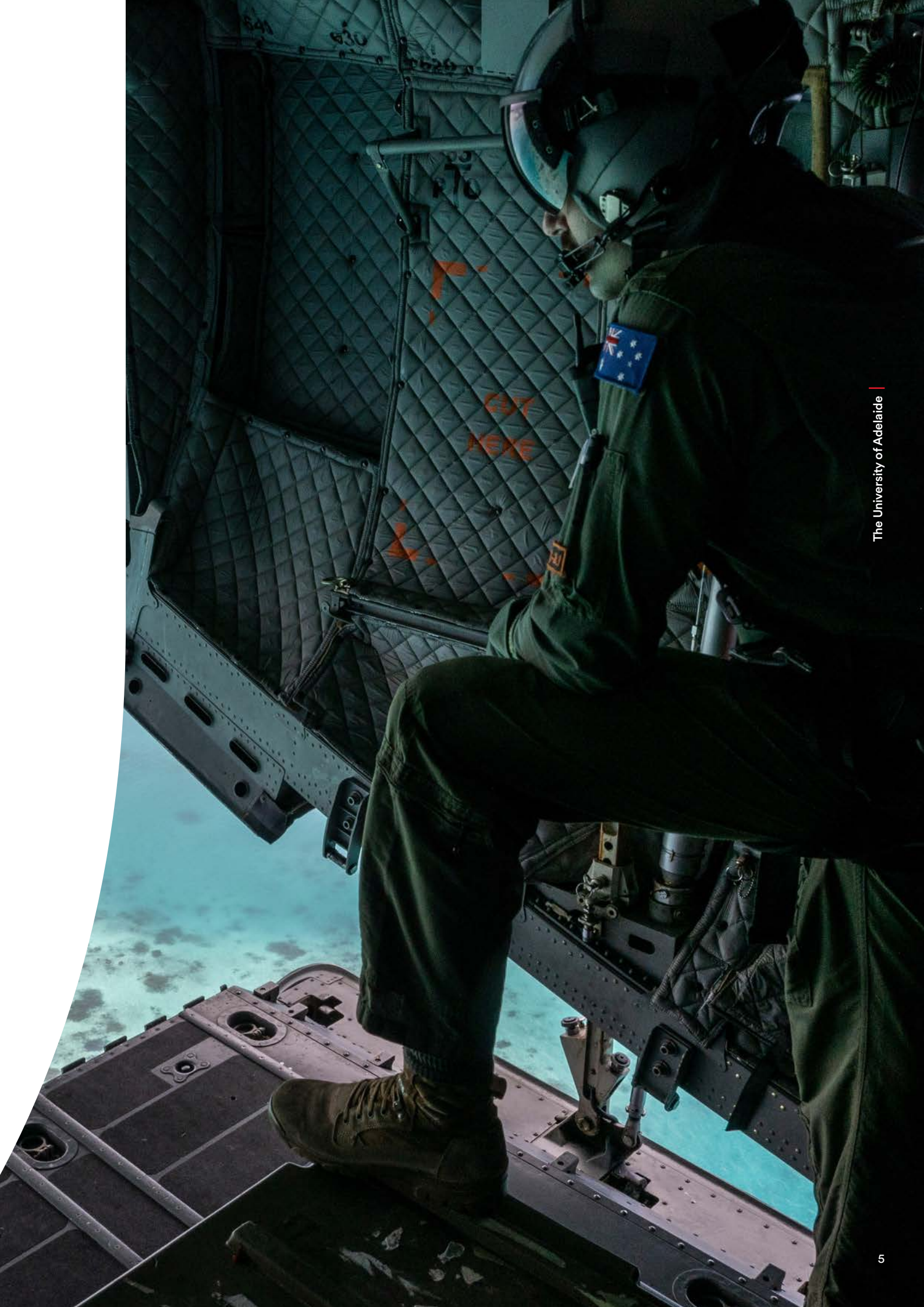
<sup>13</sup>Kiery Mannasah (2023, 14 September) How Kalsakau's government fell. *DevPolicy*. <https://devpolicy.org/how-kalsakaus-government-fell-20230914/>

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.



Map showing military bases in the Pacific Islands





# Analyse statecraft in *relative*, rather than *absolute*, terms

The example of military and security presence also demonstrates the importance of analysing the deployment of tools of statecraft in *relative*, rather than *absolute*, terms. It is easy to draw incorrect – at times, alarming – conclusions when one partner's activities are considered in isolation from others. But when partners states' activities are analysed in comparison to each other a more accurate picture emerges.

The event that motivated much of Australia's Pacific 'step-up' was the April 2018 rumour that China was seeking to establish a military base in Vanuatu. This rumour was denied by both governments and was subsequently revealed to be based on a Chinese proposal for a permanent Coast Guard presence that had been rejected by the Vanuatu government.<sup>15</sup> Australia, the US, and other allies and partners were further concerned when Kiribati and Solomon Islands switched diplomatic recognition to China in 2019. China then sought to lease Tulagi Island, home to a Second World War Japanese naval base, in Solomon Islands,<sup>16</sup> and offered to upgrade a strategically located airstrip that had hosted military aircraft during the Second World War on Kanton Island in Kiribati.<sup>17</sup> The April 2022 news that China and Solomon Islands had entered into a security agreement,<sup>18</sup> which some observers interpreted as potentially paving the way for a Chinese military presence in Solomon Islands, amplified anxieties in Canberra, Washington, and Wellington about a potential Chinese military presence in the region.<sup>19</sup>

But despite all the discussion about Chinese *potential* military presence, what is often overlooked in public debate is the *existing* military presence of allies in the Pacific Islands region. Our StoryMap shows that the US has Indo-Pacific Command in Hawai'i, a missile defence testing site in Kwajalein (RMI), a radar site

in Palau, Andersen air base and a naval base in Guam, the Coast Guard (including 11 bilateral Shiprider agreements) in the region, the Joint Region Marianas forces, and planned military bases in Palau and the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM). France has a barracks for the French Armed Forces in French Polynesia, and Air Base 186 and Point Chaleix Naval Base in New Caledonia.

Under its Pacific Maritime Security Programme, between 2018–2024 Australia is donating 23 patrol boats to 12 Pacific Island countries (as replacements for the 22 boats it donated between 1987–1995). Associated with this endeavour, Australia is also upgrading wharf infrastructure in 13 Pacific Island countries to ensure that they can safely operate and maintain the boats that will be delivered. Australia is developing Lombrum Naval Base on Manus Island in PNG in conjunction with the Papua New Guinean and US governments. Technical and operational support for the boats is provided by in-country Royal Australian Navy maritime surveillance advisers and technical advisers. These advisers, and the Australian-supported fisheries surveillance centre within the Forum Fisheries Association give Australia a strategic on-ground presence in the region.<sup>20</sup>

Therefore, while the possibility that China could establish a military presence in Solomon Islands or elsewhere is a concern for Australia, the US, New Zealand, and other partners, when seen in relative rather than absolute terms the threat this would pose may well be overstated. Australia, the US, and France already have an extensive military presence and can scale that up quickly if needed.

Similarly, there are concerns that the recent agreement between China and Solomon Islands has paved the way for the presence of Chinese police.<sup>21</sup> This too became reactive, with Australia engaging in a bidding war, donating

rifles and police vehicles to compete against Chinese police training under the agreement, which China then responded to by donating watercannons, motorbikes and vehicles.<sup>22</sup> But this again must be compared to the ongoing and broad-reaching policing assistance provided by Australia and New Zealand—which our StoryMap illustrates—stretches across the entire region.

<sup>15</sup>Peter Connolly (2023) Grand Strategy: Inside China's Statecraft in Melanesia. *Australian Foreign Policy*, 17: 42–65

<sup>16</sup>The Guardian (2019, 26 October) Solomons' government vetoes Chinese attempt to lease an island, *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/oct/25/solomons-government-vetoes-chinese-attempt-to-lease-an-island>

<sup>17</sup>Jonathan Barrett (2021, 5 May) China plans to revive strategic Pacific airstrip, Kiribati lawmaker says, Reuters, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-kiribati-exclusive-idUSKBN2CM0IZ>

<sup>18</sup>Kate Lyons and Dorothy Wickham (2022, 20 April) The deal that shocked the world: inside the China–Solomons security pact, *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/apr/20/the-deal-that-shocked-the-world-inside-the-china-solomons-security-pact>

<sup>19</sup>See for example: Jonathan Pryke (2022, 20 July) The risks of China's ambitions in the South Pacific, Brookings, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-risks-of-chinas-ambitions-in-the-south-pacific/>; Brian Harding and Camille Pohle-Anderson (2022, 21 July) 'China's Search for a Permanent Military Presence in the Pacific Islands', *United States Institute of Peace*, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/07/chinas-search-permanent-military-presence-pacific-islands>

<sup>20</sup>Joanne Wallis, Quentin Hanich, and Michael Rose (2023). *Statecraftiness: Australia's defence diplomacy in the Pacific Islands*, Adelaide Papers on Pacific Security. University of Adelaide.

<sup>21</sup>China also has bilateral policing agreements with Vanuatu and Fiji.

<sup>22</sup>Stephen Dziedzic and Evan Wasuka (2022, 4 November) China to gift water cannon trucks, vehicles to Solomon Islands police days after Australian donation. *ABC News*. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-11-04/china-to-gift-solomon-islands-police-tucks-vehicles/101614464>



# Acknowledge the difference between *quantity* and *quality*

Comparing the deployment of statecraft tools in relative terms suggests an analytical focus on *quantity*.

While quantity is important, it does not necessarily equate to the *quality* or effectiveness of those tools of statecraft. Indeed, an over-emphasis on quantity by partner states keen to be seen to be 'doing something' in response to China's activism has meant that small-scale programs run by civil society groups that are perceived as having less public relations value, are not (or no longer) receiving funding from traditional partners, even for inexpensive items like chairs, tables, and computers to assist vulnerable communities.<sup>23</sup>

Drawing on our StoryMap, the difference between quantity and quality is well illustrated by diplomatic presence and visits.

Australia is the only partner state with diplomatic posts in all Pacific Island countries, followed closely by New Zealand, which is present in all except Palau, FSM, and RMI. Japan is the next most-visible partner state with embassies in nine Pacific Island countries. China has embassies in eight of the ten Pacific Island countries with which it maintains diplomatic relations (except Niue and Cook Islands, where the ambassador accredited resides in New Zealand). Taiwan has embassies in the four countries it has diplomatic relations with: Tuvalu, Palau, Nauru, and RMI. The US has embassies in Palau, FSM, RMI, PNG,

Fiji, Timor-Leste, and Samoa (where the Ambassador resides in New Zealand). The US also re-opened embassies in Solomon Islands and Tonga in early 2023, has plans to open embassies in Kiribati and Vanuatu, and established diplomatic relations with Niue and Cook Islands in 2023 (represented by the Ambassador in New Zealand). France has embassies in PNG, Fiji, and Vanuatu, and opened its first embassy in Polynesia in 2023, in Samoa. India and Indonesia both have embassies in PNG and Fiji. Canada is looking to open an embassy in Fiji.

This diplomatic presence is not always reciprocated by Pacific Island countries. For example, Niue, Tuvalu, FSM, Cook Islands, Palau, and Kiribati do not reciprocate with diplomatic missions in Australia (although several have appointed consuls).<sup>24</sup> This might reflect that Pacific Island countries have fewer resources and consequently must carefully prioritise where they place their diplomats. This sees several Pacific Island countries maintain embassies in New York, Brussels, and Geneva to access the United Nations, European Commission, and World Trade Organisation respectively.<sup>25</sup>



Recently there has been a new trend of Pacific Island countries establishing embassies in or special envoys to Jerusalem and Abu Dhabi—these appear to be bankrolled by the host nations.<sup>26</sup>

Diplomatic missions facilitate diplomatic opportunities, but high-level visits are also part of diplomatic presence. Visits by ministers and senior officials from partner states to Pacific Island countries have increased dramatically since borders were re-opened after COVID-19-related closures. For example, in the wake of the China-Solomon Islands security agreement, Australia sent then-Minister for International Development and the Pacific Zed Seselja, and the US sent a high-level delegation consisting of National Security Council Coordinator for the Indo-Pacific Coordinator Kurt Campbell and State Department Assistant Secretary for East Asia and Pacific Affairs Dan Kritenbrink. Since then, Japan and the United Kingdom have both sent their foreign ministers to Solomon Islands; then-New Zealand foreign minister Nanaia Mahuta held a Zoom meeting; and US Coordinator Kurt Campbell made a return visit, during which he acknowledged that: ‘We did not do enough before.’<sup>27</sup> But as these visits were clearly a reaction to the China-Solomon Islands security agreement they are unlikely to generate long-term improvements in these states’

relationships with Solomon Islands. Instead, those improvements will only come through ongoing engagement, not solely relying on high-level meetings, to maintain relationships and build understanding.<sup>28</sup>

But the quantity of diplomatic engagement does not on its own lead to quality relationships between partner states and Pacific Island countries. Diplomats need time to develop genuine, ongoing relationships with ministers and senior officials in the Pacific Island countries they were posted to.<sup>30</sup> Relationships are ‘the enduring currency of influence’ in the Pacific Islands, and ‘it is individuals, not policies, that are the most important determinants of whether Australia’s statecraft succeeds’.<sup>32</sup>

The quality of diplomats also matters: their emotional quotient, attitude, ability to understand others and cultural understanding. Diplomats are not carbon copies of one another: ‘Each has their own foibles, habits, strengths and weaknesses. Their individual personalities are adjudicated and assessed intensely in the capital cities where they work, as are those of the Australian police officers, military officials and assorted contractors implementing their programs’.<sup>33</sup> Ensuring diplomats are well-selected and prepared for the Pacific Island country to which they have been posted, and willing to

develop relationships while they are there, is essential to the quality of the diplomatic exchanges they engage in and therefore their effectiveness as tools of statecraft.

Beyond high-level diplomatic engagement, public diplomacy is an increasingly prominent tool of statecraft, with social media a popular mechanism for partner state diplomats to seek to engage Pacific peoples. Social media followings are also said to affect diplomatic negotiations, and shape diplomatic influence outside of formal meetings through soft power.<sup>34</sup>

To try to understand the effectiveness of social media as a tool of statecraft, we analysed social media followings of diplomatic missions located in the region, with our results set out in figure 1 below. As expected, countries with close relationships tended to have high followers (for example, US embassies in states in free association with the US had higher social media followings than other diplomatic missions; likewise, the New Zealand High Commission in Cook Islands, also in free association, had a higher social media following than other partners in those states). Australia had a reasonably high social media reach in many Pacific Island countries, particularly PNG, its close neighbour and former colonial territory. The US had a large social media following in PNG, Timor-Leste, and Solomon Islands.

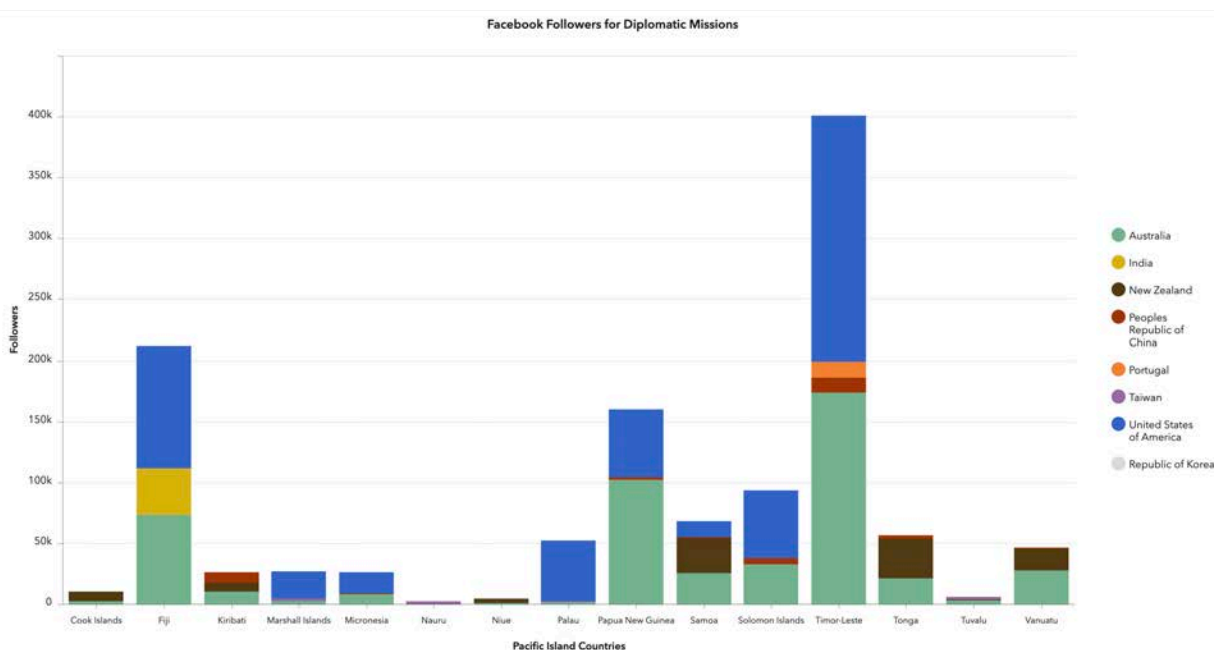


Figure 1: Facebook Followers for Diplomatic Missions based in the Pacific Islands region<sup>35</sup>

However, social media engagement does not necessarily indicate that people agree with, or even think favourably of, a partner state and/or its diplomatic mission. For example, the large following of the US embassy in Papua New Guinea could be due to interest in the controversial 2023 US-Papua New Guinea defence cooperation agreement.<sup>36</sup> It could also be due to the uproar that occurred earlier in 2023 when the US embassy raised (for the sixth year in a row) the Rainbow Flag to celebrate pride month and LGBTQIA+ communities. There was significant disinformation spread on social media about the raising of the flag, 'questioning why the Pride flag was flown at the US embassy in Port Moresby when same-sex sexual activity was illegal and also against the country's Christian beliefs'.<sup>37</sup> It is also possible that some diplomatic missions pay for extended social media reach through boosted posts, and we found examples of automated bots commenting on the social media posts of the different diplomatic missions, which may indicate that their reach is not as broad as it first seems.



<sup>23</sup>Henrietta McNeill (2023) *Offshore Currents: Examining the securitisation of criminal deportations to Tonga, Samoa and Cook Islands*. PhD Thesis, Australian National University.

<sup>24</sup>Derek Futaiasi, Priestley Habru, Maima Koro, William Waqavakatoga, and Henrietta McNeill (2023) *Lalaga, tithiki, talia vata: Pacific Islands weaving statecraft*. Adelaide Papers on Pacific Security. University of Adelaide. [https://www.adelaide.edu.au/stretton/ua/media/683/ua30631-stretton-centre-paper-3-digital\\_0.pdf](https://www.adelaide.edu.au/stretton/ua/media/683/ua30631-stretton-centre-paper-3-digital_0.pdf)

<sup>25</sup>Ibid.

<sup>26</sup>Allyson Horn, Orly Halpern, Haidarr Jones, and Tim Swanston (2023, 6 September) Israel to bankroll PNG embassy in the contested city of Jerusalem, says PNG prime minister James Marape. ABC News. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-09-06/israel-to-bankroll-png-embassy-in-jerusalem/102818394>

<sup>27</sup>Nick Sas and Chrisnrita Aumanu-Leong (2023, 22 March) Solomon Islands receives visits from United States, China and Japan as 'friends to all, enemy to none' policy proves popular. ABC News. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-03-22/solomon-islands-china-us-japan-visits/102123368>

<sup>28</sup>Henrietta McNeill and Joanne Wallis (2023) *US Engagement in Micronesia: lessons from Australia and New Zealand*. National Bureau of Research on Asia Special Report #104, Charting a New Course for the Pacific Islands. <https://www.nbr.org/publication/u-s-engagement-in-micronesia-lessons-from-australia-and-new-zealand/>

<sup>30</sup>Hugh White speaking on Gordon Peake (2023) Statecraftiness - What is statecraft? Statecraftiness Podcast. <https://podcasts.apple.com/au/podcast/what-is-statecraft-episode-1/id1675420291?i=1000602575764>

<sup>31</sup>Derek Futaiasi, Priestley Habru, Maima Koro, William Waqavakatoga, and Henrietta McNeill (2023b, 14 April) Relationships are the Enduring Currency of Influence for the Pacific Islands. *Australian Outlook*. <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/relationships-are-the-enduring-currency-of-influence-for-the-pacific-islands>

<sup>32</sup>Joanne Wallis and Gordon Peake (2023, 18 April) Penny Wong said this week national power comes from 'our people'. Are we ignoring this most vital resource? *The Conversation*. <https://theconversation.com/penny-wong-said-this-week-national-power-comes-from-our-people-are-we-ignoring-this-most-vital-resource-203145>

<sup>33</sup>Ibid

<sup>34</sup>Ashbrook, Cathryn Clüver, and Alvaro Renedo Zalba (2021) Social Media Influence on Diplomatic Negotiation: Shifting the Shape of the Table. *Negotiation Journal* 37(1): 83–96.

<sup>35</sup>Wallis and Rose. 'Statecraftiness: Mapping Statecraft in the Pacific Islands'.

<sup>36</sup>RNZ (2023, 21 September) Statecraft in the Pacific. RNZ News. <https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/498453/statecraft-in-the-pacific>

<sup>37</sup>PNGFacts (2023) US Embassy in PNG explains gay pride flag. <https://www.pngfacts.com/news/us-embassy-in-png-explains-gay-pride-flag>



# Analyse statecraft over the *long*, rather than *short*, term

Assessing the effectiveness of diplomacy in the Pacific Islands region highlights the importance of analysing statecraft over the long, rather than short, term.

This was illustrated by how the US responded to the Solomon Islands-China security agreement. After the agreement was signed, the US immediately sent senior diplomatic officials to Solomon Islands, despite not having had a diplomatic presence in Solomon Islands for 29 years.<sup>38</sup> The US's long absence from Solomon Islands undermined the value of these diplomatic visits, as the 'quality of relationships determines outcomes far more so than might and money in the Pacific',<sup>39</sup> with those quality relationships built up over time.

Similarly, the US largely withdrew its Peace Corps from the Pacific Islands region after the Cold War. This has meant that there is a generation of American diplomatic and officials who missed the opportunity to develop relationships in, and knowledge of, the Pacific Islands region. Peace Corps are very effective at learning local languages, community-based support, and establishing long-standing relationships with people in villages and outer islands; in contrast to other state-supported volunteers who are predominantly posted to capital cities

and do not have as much community integration. While the US government has committed to redeploying Peace Corps volunteers, progress has been slow.

The value of developing relationships in, and knowledge of, the Pacific Islands region over the long-term highlights the importance of Pacific literacy in partner states, both in political and official sectors and in the wider public.<sup>40</sup> While there are large Pacific diasporas in Australia, New Zealand, and the US, including naturalised, next-generation, students, and migrant workers, there is still limited understanding of Pacific cultures and languages in these partner states, including in policymaking and political circles.

Language is important to Pacific literacy and can be important to the effectiveness of diplomacy, since it can allow diplomats to communicate more easily with their Pacific counterparts, but also to understand cultural nuances and practices that are described in Pacific languages, but which may not easily translate to English.

New Zealand has done the most to promote Pacific languages, reflecting that it is home to a large diaspora from the region. The New Zealand government hosts Pacific language weeks, focussing one week every year on each Pacific language: Tuvaluan, Fijian, Niuean, Tokelauan, Rotuman, Samoan, Kiribati, Cook Islands Māori, and Tongan.<sup>41</sup> Several universities in New Zealand (University of Auckland, Otago University, Victoria University Wellington, and Manukau Institute of Technology), and the Centre for Pacific Languages in New Zealand teach a range of Pacific languages including Samoan, Niuean, Cook Islands Māori, Tongan, and Rotuman.

Australia has devoted less energy to developing Pacific languages,<sup>42</sup> which are only taught at the Australian National University (Tetum, Tok Pisin). The situation is the same in the US, where the University of Hawai'i (Hawaiian, Tahitian, Samoan, and Tongan) and the University of Guam (CHamorro) are the only places that teach Pacific languages. Notably, China has increased its Pacific language programs: Beijing Foreign Studies University teaches Tok Pisin, Fijian, Samoan, Tongan, Bislama (Vanuatu), French, Māori, and Niuean. China has established seven centres dedicated to Pacific studies in universities across China.<sup>43</sup> It is noticeable in the Pacific Islands region that Chinese diplomats are often fluent in Pacific languages, while there are varying levels of language ability displayed by diplomats from traditional partner states.

Beyond language, understanding is also developed through the media. Australia, China, New Zealand, the UK, and the US all broadcast state media into the region. Australia's public broadcaster the ABC transmits radio to seven Pacific Island countries, and television to 16. New Zealand-based Radio New Zealand Pacific broadcasts through the region in Cook Islands Māori, Tuvaluan, Tokelauan, Tongan, French, Samoan, and Niuean among other languages, as well as English; and TVNZ has established Pasifika TV, a channel that makes sports, news, current affairs, documentaries and entertainment shows free-to-air in the Pacific, resulting in New Zealand news being on the television every night of the week in most Pacific countries. The UK's BBC World Service transmits via radio in Fiji, Kiribati, PNG, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu. Voice of America News is available online, but not in any

Pacific languages. Chinese state television network China Global Television Network broadcasts in FSM, Samoa, Vanuatu, Fiji, and Tonga; Xinhua News Agency has agreements to share content around the region; and China Radio International broadcasts to Vanuatu, Samoa and Tonga.

'Soft power' tools of statecraft such as media broadcasts, scholarships (discussed in a separate paper),<sup>44</sup> church networks, language training, and cultural exchanges are often overlooked in analyses of partner states' activities in the Pacific Islands region, which tend to focus on more quantifiable tools of statecraft such as aid, loans, infrastructure projects, and security assistance. But this misses the value of these soft power tools of statecraft over the long-term, as they have the potential to shape the beliefs, attitudes, and/or opinions of actors, communities, and/or individuals in the region in ways that are harder to immediately identify, but which might influence the outlook of a government, and consequently its policies.

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<sup>38</sup>McNeill and Wallis (2023) *US Engagement in Micronesia*.

<sup>39</sup>Futaiaisi et al (2023) *Relationships are the enduring currency of influence*.

<sup>40</sup>Joanne Wallis and Ian Kemish, 'Key to Pacific relationship is education: ours, not theirs', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 August 2022.

<sup>41</sup>Ministry for Pacific Peoples (2023) Pacific Language Weeks 2023. New Zealand Government: Wellington. <https://mpp.govt.nz/programmes/pacific-language-weeks/>

<sup>42</sup>Dion Enari and Lorayma Taula (2022) Tattoo my mouth: Samoan language survival in Australia. *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples*, 18(1), 215-218

<sup>43</sup>Denghua Zhang (2020) Growing Academic Interest in the Pacific — Pacific Research Centres in China. *In Brief 2020/2*. Department of Pacific Affairs, Australian National University: Canberra [https://dpa.bellschool.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/publications/attachments/2020-02/dpa\\_in\\_brief\\_2020\\_2\\_zhang\\_final.pdf](https://dpa.bellschool.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/publications/attachments/2020-02/dpa_in_brief_2020_2_zhang_final.pdf)

<sup>44</sup>Priestley Habru, Wilhelmina Utukana, Feagaimaalii Soti Mapu, Jim Tawa Biliki, and Epo Mark (2023) *Australia's Pacific scholarships as a tool of statecraft: student perspectives*. Adelaide Papers in Pacific Security. University of Adelaide. <https://www.adelaide.edu.au/stretton/ua/media/681/ua30629-stretton-centre-paper-2-digital.pdf>





# Distinguish between *announcement* and *implementation*

One of the challenges of compiling our StoryMap, and of analysing the deployment of tools of statecraft more generally, is distinguishing between the *announcement* and the *implementation* of tools of statecraft.

As partner states deploy tools of statecraft to improve their reputations and relationships, they tend to announce these tools through media releases and press conferences to maximise the attention they receive. This can mean that these announcements are interpreted as being more significant than their practical outcomes when—and if—they are implemented.

This gap between announcement and implementation was illustrated by the 2020 announcement that China's Ministry of Commerce had agreed to a A\$204m deal with the Papua New Guinea government to establish a 'comprehensive multi-functional fishery industrial park' project on Daru Island in PNG. The memorandum of understanding offered little detail, but was expected to allow Chinese-backed commercial vessels to fish in the Torres Strait.<sup>45</sup> Australia was concerned that the fishing park would give China a foothold only a few kilometres from Australia<sup>46</sup> and reacted by quickly signing a memorandum of understanding of its own with the PNG Government worth A\$30 million for an 'economic empowerment program' on Daru.<sup>47</sup>

Since 2020, there has been no substantive progress on the Chinese project (admittedly, the COVID-19 pandemic may have contributed to this). But it's unlikely Australia's reaction influenced this. While a 'New Daru City' project to transform the port town into a business, commercial, and industrial zone was floated in 2020, in 2021 the PNG government said it was

not formally considering such a proposal. Indeed, the idea of a Chinese-backed firm building an island city on Daru has been described as a 'mirage' that will 'never eventuate'.

While any initiative by Australia to advance development on Daru Island—long a neglected region of PNG—is welcome, the speed of Australia's reaction to the Chinese government's announcement of its own plans for Daru exemplifies how an announcement can be over-interpreted.

More recently, the new government elected in Australia in May 2022 announced a 'Pacific Engagement Visa' in February 2023.<sup>48</sup> According to the announcement, this visa would give up to 3000 citizens of Pacific Island countries the opportunity to migrate to Australia as permanent residents each year. The first ballot to select applicants was supposed to occur in July 2023. But it took until mid-October 2023 for the legislation to create the visa to get approved by the Senate. The visa was celebrated when it was announced, representing a welcome recognition of Australia's deep relationships in the region and the necessity of migration pathways for the region's young population.<sup>50</sup> But the government's delay in getting the enabling legislation through the Senate highlights the risk of over-promising and then under-delivering.

Similarly, to settle the 'Tuna Wars,' in 1985 the US agreed to a multilateral tuna fisheries treaty that was in the interests of Pacific states. The US-Pacific Tuna Treaty has been updated and re-negotiated thrice since, most recently in 2022, when Vice President Kamala Harris promised USD\$600million in Economic Assistance to Pacific Island states over a period of ten years via the Treaty. However, in

October 2023, Congress was still to approve the funds—a promise made, but never delivered. Another USD\$200m in aid was promised by US President Joe Biden in 2023. But still awaiting the 2022 package Pacific leaders have become sceptical, commenting that 'time will tell if the US will follow through with its latest Pacific funding pledge'.<sup>51</sup> This is a wider and ongoing concern for Pacific Island countries, where announcements are made, but often not delivered on.

<sup>45</sup>Aaron Smith (2020, 27 November) Chinese fishing plant in Torres Strait raises alarm for Australian industry and islanders. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/nov/27/chinese-fishing-plant-in-torres-strait-raises-alarm-for-australian-industry-and-islanders>

<sup>46</sup>Jeffery Wall (2020, 8 December) China to build \$200 million fishery project on Australia's doorstep. *The Strategist*. <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/china-to-build-200-million-fishery-project-on-australias-doorstep/>

<sup>47</sup>Catherine Graue (2021, 10 May) Australia and PNG sign agreement for remote Daru but little detail on specifics. *ABC Pacific Beat*. <https://www.abc.net.au/pacific/programs/pacificbeat/australia-and-png-sign-agreement-for-remote-daru/13337030>

<sup>48</sup>Sebastian Strangio (2021, 9 February) Why China's 'Island City' in Papua New Guinea is a Mirage. *The Diplomat*. <https://thediplomat.com/2021/02/why-chinas-island-city-in-papua-new-guinea-is-a-mirage/>

<sup>49</sup>Penny Wong (2023, 16 February) Pacific Engagement Visa: Strengthening ties with the Pacific family. Australian Government: Canberra, <https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/penny-wong/media-release/pacific-engagement-visa-strengthening-ties-pacific-family>

<sup>50</sup>Stephen Howes and Ema Vueti (2023, 5 July) The Pacific Engagement Visa needs to be delivered. *DevPolicy*. <https://devpolicy.org/the-pacific-engagement-visa-needs-to-be-delivered-20230705/>

<sup>51</sup>Linda Lewis (2023, 9 October) 'Time will tell': Henry Puna on US funding pledges to Pacific leaders. *RNZ News*. <https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/499744/time-will-tell-henry-puna-on-us-funding-pledges-to-pacific-leaders>



# Identify the source of the tools of statecraft

Another challenge we have encountered as we have compiled our StoryMap is of identifying the source of tools of statecraft.

This is due to partner states frequently sub-contracting out the delivery of their tools of statecraft to state-owned enterprises (in the case of China) or private contractors, non-government organisations, or multilateral institutions (in the case of Australia, the US, New Zealand, and other partners). This generates two phenomena.

The first phenomenon is that it is often unclear which partner state is funding a tool of statecraft. As interlocutors from the Pacific have told us, with so much Australian development assistance provided by private contractors and non-government organisations, the average Pacific person often doesn't realise that it comes from Australia. For example, many local-level health and education programs are provided by non-government organisations such as World Vision or Save the Children; as one Pacific colleague commented: 'it's their t-shirts people see; Australia's name isn't anywhere'. Similarly, Australian policing assistance is increasingly provided by private contractors, rather than by Australian police. For example, in Vanuatu Palladium is contracted by Australia to provide policing, justice, and community services.<sup>52</sup> And while Australian Federal Police officers are in Vanuatu, they are managed by Palladium, which gives the impression that the Australian government

contracts private companies to manage Australian officials. This means that, while Australia might tot up the value of its development assistance and assume that, by quantity and relative to other partners, it is deploying a considerable amount of statecraft tools, the recipients of these tools are often unaware that it is Australia that is providing them. It also often means that key Australian government messaging developed with the intention of improving its reputation in Pacific Island countries may not translate through the many layers of out-sourcing.

The second phenomenon is that the wrong partner state often gets credit for providing tools of statecraft. This is most evident when it comes to infrastructure projects. Prominent analyses have argued that, through its 'Belt and Road Initiative' of funding infrastructure projects, China is engaged in 'debt-trap diplomacy' (although this has been debunked).<sup>53</sup> This idea holds that China can use its infrastructure lending to secure future access key resources or military facilities (such as ports or airstrips) in the region if debtor states cannot service their loans. But while many infrastructure projects in the region are being built by Chinese state-owned enterprises, many are funded by multilateral institutions such as the Asian Development Bank, rather than by the Chinese government. This is because Chinese companies are often the sole bidders for infrastructure tenders, and frequently bid very low to secure the contract. For example, Chinese companies have received 80% of Asian Development Bank contracts in PNG.<sup>54</sup> Much of this Asian Development Bank funding comes from partners such as Australia (AUD\$11.31 billion)<sup>55</sup> and the US (US\$26.9 billion)<sup>56</sup>, but because the

infrastructure projects are implemented by Chinese state-owned enterprises, the source of this funding is obscured. This means that China often gets the credit – and consequent reputational boost—for projects that it does not fund.

Relatedly, while by necessity our StoryMap has focused primarily on the activities of partner states, it is also important to acknowledge the activities of non-state actors, including civil society groups and non-government organisations, such as churches, in statecraft.

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<sup>52</sup>Judy Putt and Sinclair Dinnen (2023) *The Vanuatu-Australia Policing and Justice Services Study*. Department of Pacific Affairs, Australian National University: Canberra [https://openresearch-repository.anu.edu.au/bitstream/1885/292288/4/The%20Vanuatu-Australia%20Policing%20and%20Justice%20Services%20Study\\_Judy%20Putt\\_Sinclair%20Dinnen\\_Department%20of%20Pacific%20Affairs\\_Research%20Report.pdf](https://openresearch-repository.anu.edu.au/bitstream/1885/292288/4/The%20Vanuatu-Australia%20Policing%20and%20Justice%20Services%20Study_Judy%20Putt_Sinclair%20Dinnen_Department%20of%20Pacific%20Affairs_Research%20Report.pdf)

<sup>53</sup>John Kehoe (2018, May 14) US report: China 'debt trap' on Australia's doorstep. *Australian Financial Review*. <https://www.afr.com/world/us-secret-report-china-debt-trap-on-australias-doorstep-20180513-h0zzwd>. For debunking see: Shahar Hameiri (2020, 9 September) Debunking the myth of China's "debt-trap diplomacy". *Lowy Interpreter*. <https://www.loyyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/debunking-myth-china-s-debt-trap-diplomacy>

<sup>54</sup>Connolly (2023) *Grand Strategy*. Kirsty Needham (2023, 22 March) China firm wins Solomon Islands port project as Australia watches on. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/chinese-company-wins-tender-redevelop-solomon-islands-port-official-2023-03-22/>

<sup>55</sup>Asian Development Bank (2023) *Asian Development Bank and Australia: Fact Sheet*, <https://www.adb.org/publications/australia-fact-sheet>

<sup>56</sup>Asian Development Bank (2023) *Asian Development Bank Member Fact Sheet: United States*, <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/27810/usa-2022.pdf>

# Conclusion: be *proactive*, rather than *reactive*

The data we have collected and analysed for our StoryMap reveals that Australia and its allies and partners, particularly New Zealand and the US, have by far the more extensive presence in the Pacific Islands region and deploy by far the greatest and most expansive range of tools of statecraft.

While these partner states, and others, have legitimate strategic concerns about China's increasingly visible presence, when the size and impact of China's deployment of tools of statecraft in the region is evaluated, they can afford to be less anxious.

This means that Australia, the US, and New Zealand have time and space to ensure that their deployment of tools of statecraft in the Pacific Islands region is *proactive* rather than *reactive*. Since 2018 there have been many reactive responses by these partner states. For example, after rumours that China Mobile was in talks to acquire the region's largest private telco Digicel,<sup>57</sup> Australia funded Australian telco, Telstra, with US\$1.33billion to acquire Digicel. This figure was larger than the Australian aid budget for the region.<sup>58</sup> The economic and developmental cases behind the purchase have been questioned,<sup>59</sup> as

has its potential reputational risks for Australia if Digicel is unable to lower mobile internet prices (long a concern in the region, particularly given Digicel's 'predatory loan scheme'<sup>60</sup>) and comes into conflict with domestic regulators in Pacific Island countries.<sup>61</sup> This example highlights how a reaction is reflexive, quick, and provides little time for deliberation, with the Australian government preoccupied by the perceived security risk posed by China Mobile owning Digicel, rather than considering the broader and long-term implications of the deal.

Instead of *reacting* to each Chinese announcement or initiative, Australia, the US, New Zealand, and other partner states need to shift to a *proactive* approach. A *proactive* approach provides time for consideration, seeking information, and then calm, rational evaluation. A *proactive* approach would recognise the risk of over-interpreting the impact of tools of statecraft, particularly when they are viewed in isolation and in the short-term. Instead, each partner state's statecraft should be analysed *relative* to other partners, over the *long-term*, with a focus on *implementation* rather than *announcement*, acknowledging the difference between *quality* and *quantity* and between *correlation* and *causation*, and with an eye to identifying the source of the tool of statecraft. By collating the tools of statecraft being deployed by partner states, our StoryMap offers a good place for partners to begin this responsive analysis.







<sup>57</sup>Probyn, Andrew (2021, 20 July) Australian taxpayers could help buy Pacific arm of telecommunications giant Digicel to stop China from nabbing it first. *ABC News*. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-07-20/digicel-telstra-federal-government-deal-communications-china/100308288>

<sup>58</sup>Amanda H A Watson speaking on Gordon Peake (2023) Statecraftiness - They came, they saw, they cabled - Episode 3. Statecraftiness Podcast. <https://podcasts.apple.com/au/podcast/statecraftiness-they-came-they-saw-they-cabled-episode-3/id1675420291?i=1000604891486>

<sup>59</sup>Stephen Howes and Huiyuan Liu (2022, 21 April) Australian government gifts US\$190 million to Telstra to buy Digicel. *DevPolicy*. <https://devpolicy.org/australian-government-gifts-190million-to-telstra-to-buy-digicel-20220421/>

<sup>60</sup>Nayahamui Michelle Rooney, Martin Davies and Stephen Howes (2020, 25 May) Mi gat Y: Is Digicel PNG's loan scheme predatory? *DevPolicy*. <https://devpolicy.org/mi-gat-y-is-digicel-pngs-loan-scheme-predatory-20200521/>

<sup>61</sup>Stephen Howes (2021, 26 October) Australia buys Digicel, PNG's mobile monopoly. *DevPolicy*. <https://devpolicy.org/australia-buys-digicel-pacific-pngs-mobile-monopoly-20211026/>





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Page 1 - Personnel from the Vanuatu Mobile Forces unload palletised aid from Australia at Port Vila International Airport, Vanuatu. Source: Department of Defence.

Page 3 - Australian Army soldier Sergeant Alefosio Kakala's family and friends wave to him onboard a Royal Australian Navy MRH-90 Taipan helicopter as it overflies his home village in Tonga while serving on Operation Tonga Assist 2022. Source: Department of Defence.

Page 5 - Royal Australian Air Force loadmaster Corporal Jakeb Thorogood looks out over the C-17J Spartan aircraft ramp during a maritime surveillance flight over Palau's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in support of the Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency during Operation Solania. Source: Department of Defence.

Page 7 - The Hon Pat Conroy, Minister for International Development & the Pacific at a State dinner hosted by the Hon Kausea Natano, Prime Minister of Tuvalu in Funafuti, Tuvalu on August 28, 2023. Source: Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

Page 9 - The locally led Vanuatu Skills Partnership (VSP) is building the skills Vanuatu needs to grow its economy, adapt to climate change, and drive low-carbon growth in tourism, agribusiness, handicraft, and construction sectors. Source: Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

Page 11 - A local community member participates in a traditional canoe dance during Independence Day celebrations, Wewak, Papua New Guinea. Source: Department of Defence.

Page 14 - The Honourable Win Bakri Daki, MP, Papua New Guinea Minister for Defence and The Honourable Matt Keogh, MP, Minister for Defence Personnel and Veterans' Affairs sign the certificates during the hand over ceremony of the NUSHIP Gilbert Toropo at HMAS Stirling, Western Australia. Source: Department of Defence.

Page 15 - top: A Republic of Fiji Military Forces soldier prepares to board an Australian Army CH-47F Chinook helicopter at Fua'amotu international airport in Tonga as part of Operation Tonga Assist 2022. Source: Department of Defence.

Page 15 - bottom: Federated States of Micronesia personnel from the Guardian-class patrol boat FSS Toshiwo Nakayama after the handover ceremony at Austal ship building facility in Henderson, Perth, Western Australia. Source: Department of Defence.

Page 17 - Royal Australian Air Force loadmaster Sergeant Daniel Saunders in the crowd of students during a visit to the Ted Diro Elementary and Primary School, Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea. Source: Department of Defence.



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