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Statecraftiness: weaving webs of statecraft in the Pacific Islands

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Contents

Introduction

As a growing number of partner states pursue their ambitions in the crowded and complex[1] geopolitics of the Pacific Islands region, Australia is concerned about how its interests may be affected by partner states using tools of statecraft to influence, or even coerce, PICs and/or other actors in the region.

In response, Australia has 'stepped-up' its Pacific policy, deploying its own tools of statecraft to strengthen its—often long-standing—relationships in the region.

Most analyses of geopolitics in the Pacific Islands focus primarily on comparing the actors seeking to exercise power, rather than on understanding the techniques, or means, deployed. This leads to assumptions that partner states 'acquire influence' by virtue of their activities, with very little consideration of which specific range of statecraft tools they are using and how they relate to each other.

This paper fills this gap by presenting the component parts of the webs of statecraft that partner states are weaving in the region. A subsequent paper will analyse how PICs are weaving their own webs in response.

[1]Pacific Islands Forum [PIF] (2018) Boe Declaration on Regional Security; Joanne Wallis (2017) Crowded and complex: The changing geopolitics of the South Pacific. Australian Strategic Policy Institute.

What is statecraft?

It is now common to hear politicians and commentators refer to 'statecraft'.

In November 2022, Australian analyst Alan Gyngell quipped that 'statecraft' should be the 'word of the year'. However, what the term means is often unclear. For some, statecraft refers to the whole foreign policymaking process. For others, it describes the ways that states pursue their foreign policy goals.

We adopt a comprehensive definition of statecraft as:

*the actions that states take to change:
(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.*[2]

Our definition echoes elements of the Australian Government's understanding of grey-zone security challenges: 'activities designed to coerce countries in ways that seek to avoid military conflict', including 'exploiting influence, interference operations and the coercive use of trade and economic levers'.[3] But while the government's definition elides coercion and influence, for clarity we differentiate between them.

- We understand *coercion* as the direct exercise of state power to alter – whether through negative inducements (actual or threatened punishments) or positive inducements (actual or promised rewards) – the target's policies and/or behaviour.

- We understand *influence* as the indirect exercise of state power to (re)shape targets' beliefs, attitudes, and/or opinions.

While influence is ostensibly non-coercive, targets may find some influence attempts coercive if they fundamentally challenge their beliefs, attitudes, and/or opinions. Furthermore, influence and coercion often occur simultaneously, either mutually reinforcing or undermining each other.

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[2] Adapted from K.J. Holsti (1976) 'The Study of Diplomacy', in James N. Rosenau, Kenneth W. Thompson, and Gavin Boyd (eds.), *World Politics*, New York: Free Press and David A Baldwin (1985) Economic statecraft, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

[3] Department of Defence (2020) 2020 Defence Strategic Update: 12

The tools
of statecraft

We present the major tools of statecraft that partner states are deploying in the Pacific Islands.

These tools may induce short-term, instrumental changes in behaviour and/or long-term changes to the ideas about, and predispositions towards, the partner state deploying them. They are usually coexistent and interrelated; at times intersecting with or even undermining one another. For that reason, we characterise the deployment of tools of statecraft in the region as located within 'webs of statecraft' made-up of six categories:

- security and defence;
- economic;
- diplomatic;
- soft power;
- grey-zone; and
- black-zone.

On the outside of each web are well-established and well-publicised (observable) economic, security and defence, and diplomatic tools of statecraft. The less tangible tool of statecraft, soft power, sits in the next layer. Deep within each web hide the covert tools: grey-zone activities and black-zone activities (including political assassination and blackmail). While the latter are tools of statecraft, we do not address them in this paper.
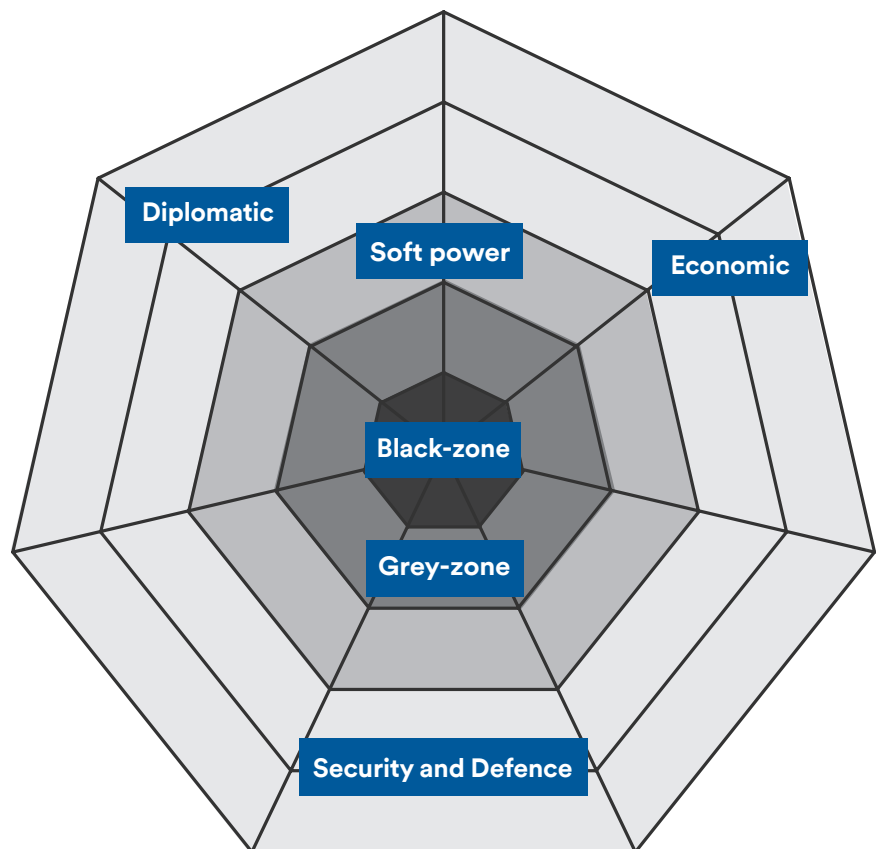
The tools of statecraft

Security and defence

Security and defence related tools of statecraft commonly deployed in the Pacific Islands region include:

- assistance aimed at building the capacity (both materiel and human capability) of Pacific Island states' defence, police, and other security forces;

- defence diplomacy, such as military exercises and port visits;

- security cooperation between partners, PICs, and/or regional organisations;[9] and

- crisis response, including humanitarian and disaster relief (HADR) and stabilisation operations.

Australia has long been the partner state with the most significant involvement in security and defence in the southern Pacific Islands, with the US playing a major role in the northern Pacific through its territories and freely associated states.

Security and defence tools of statecraft can influence target states and actors by creating a positive opinion of their donor. For example, Australia's Pacific Maritime Security Programme, which provides patrol boats, aerial surveillance, training, assistance, and sustainment to help PICs protect their massive maritime territories, is generally seen positively by PICs, as is Australia's support to the multilateral Forum Fisheries Agency, which coordinates regional fisheries management.

However, security and defence tools of statecraft can also be coercive when they force target states and actors to change their behaviour. For example, the United States' (US) military base in the Republic of Marshall Islands (RMI) constrains RMI's foreign policy choices.

Concern has also been expressed that the 2022 security agreement between Solomon Islands and China could allow China to coerce Solomon Islands, by creating a mechanism for Chinese military or police deployment to Solomon Islands. Numerous states used their webs of statecraft to try to discourage Solomon Islands from concluding the deal, and China has responded in kind. For example, just two days after Australia donated semi-automatic rifles and vehicles to the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force, China countered with a donation of water cannon trucks, motorcycles, and cars.[10]

Similar competitive dynamics have become prominent in respect to humanitarian and disaster relief (HADR). For example, after the January 2022 Tongan volcanic eruption and tsunami, partner states offered considerable HADR. The Australian-led International Coordination Cell coordinated much of this assistance, but China operated outside that cooperative mechanism. With Tonga's borders closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, most assistance was contactless. This meant that the different partner states did not come into direct contact, which reduced the likelihood of friction between them. But competitive and poorly coordinated HADR is a possibility in the future.

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[9] Joanne Wallis, Henrietta McNeill, James Batley, and Anna Powles (2021) Mapping Security Cooperation in the Pacific Islands. Department of Pacific Affairs, ANU: Canberra:

[10] Stephen Dziedzic and Evan Wasuka (2022, 4 November) China to gift Solomon Islands police trucks and vehicles. ABC News.

The tools of statecraft

Economic

The most common and visible economic tools of statecraft in the Pacific Islands are:

- aid;
- loans;
- investment; and
- trade.

Partner states usually begin with positive inducements before resorting to sanctions if positive inducements fail to bring about the desired change in the targets' behaviour. However, positive incentives always imply that negative ones may follow. For example, targets are aware that trade and aid benefits can always be removed.

Development aid is the most used economic tool of statecraft,[4] reflecting the relatively low levels of development in many parts of the region. Papua New Guinea (PNG) is ranked 156 (out of 191) on the United Nations Human Development Index, Solomon Islands 155, Vanuatu 140, and Kiribati 136.[5] For example, aid conditionality, used by Australia and New Zealand between the late 1980s and early 2000s, influenced several PICs to accept their proposed neoliberal economic and 'good' governance reforms. With the expanded range of donors available today, PICs now have more choice, which consequently reduces the likely influence of any one donor.

Loans are another important economic statecraft tool. China's concessional ('soft') loans for infrastructure projects have triggered claims that it is engaged in 'debt-trap diplomacy',[7] whereby it could coerce target states to agree to convert ostensibly civilian infrastructure such as ports for military purposes if the target state can no longer service its loans. Although scholars dispute the existence of debt-trap diplomacy,[8] concerns about Chinese loans influence Australia and its partners' geoeconomic strategies.

Foreign direct investment (FDI) is another tool of economic statecraft, and several partner states have taken steps to promote it. For example, in 2018 Australia allocated an extra A$1 billion to its Export Finance and Insurance Corporation to support Australian private sector investment, with a focus on infrastructure.

But while FDI can promote development and create a positive opinion of investor's home state or its developmental and/or political model, it can undermine partner states' reputations when they are associated with particular projects. For example, the Panguna copper mine in the Bougainville region of PNG was operated by Bougainville Copper Limited, in which Australian company Rio Tinto was a major shareholder. The mine played a major role in instigating conflict that raged in Bougainville during the 1990s. Similarly, the Ok Tedi mine in PNG was operated by Australian mining company Broken Hill Proprietary Company Limited and has caused environmental damage and population displacement.

Finally, trade is a tool of economic statecraft, constituting either an attractive inducement when offering PICs concessional – or unrestricted – access to partner states' domestic markets, or a sanction when taking the form of import restrictions. Indeed, free trade agreements have become a battleground between partner states, with Australia and New Zealand at times concerned that they were being excluded from cooperative mechanisms between PICs. For example, as a compromise to PICs agreeing to the *Pacific Island Countries Trade Agreement* in 2001, Australia and New Zealand were included in the *Pacific Agreement on Closer Economic Relations (PACER)*. After the European Union began negotiating with PICs to create Economic Partnership Agreements (which ultimately only PNG, Fiji, Solomon Islands, and Samoa joined), Australia and New Zealand pushed for similar market access under the *PACER Plus* agreement. Negotiations on *PACER Plus* proved challenging, with a final agreement only entering into force in 2020. PNG and Fiji, the region's two largest economies, opted out of the deal.

A source of tension in many trade negotiations has been access to labour markets for Pacific workers. This highlights the role of labour mobility programs, and even permanent migration, as tools of statecraft to influence the opinions of PICs and Pacific people.

Both New Zealand and Australia have developed labour mobility programs with specific visas attached. In addition, passport holders from the three countries in free association with the United States (US) – the RMI, Federated States of Micronesia and Republic of Palau – have access to the United States' (US), including for work, as do those from states in free association with New Zealand – Niue and Cook Islands. While labour mobility offers higher wages and improved remittances, it can hollow out PICs' labour markets, contribute to a 'brain drain', and even exploitative labour practices. For example, the RMI saw a 20% drop in population between 2011 and 2021.

Another source of tension is regulatory standards, with the export market for kava a prominent example. Kava is grown widely in PICs, and there is potential to develop substantial export markets. Until recently, Australia restricted kava imports due to concerns about its health effects – banning the import of kava almost entirely in 2007. After PICs deployed tools of statecraft to lobby Australia, and Australia recognised the attractiveness of offering market access, in 2019 it increased the quantity of kava that could be brought into Australia for personal use, and in 2021 it introduced a scheme for commercial kava importation.

[4]Lowy Institute (2022) Pacific Aid Map.

[5]UNDP (2022) Human Development Report 2021/22.

[6]Joanne Wallis (2017) *Pacific Power? Australia's Strategy in the Pacific Islands*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press

[7]Parker, S., & Chefitz, G. (2018) *China's Debtbook Diplomacy: How China Is Turning Bad Loans into Strategic Investments*. The Diplomat.

[8]Jones, L. and Hameiri, S. (2020) *Debunking the Myth of 'Debt-trap Diplomacy*, Chatham House.

Diplomatic

Diplomatic tools of statecraft include:

- diplomatic presence;
- official visits by state leaders and officials;
- participation in multilateral and minilateral mechanisms; and
- sanctions.

Partner states have indicated that they see diplomatic presence as an important tool of statecraft in the region. Australia recently opened a consulate in French Polynesia, which meant that it became the only state with diplomatic representation in every member of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF). The US has similarly committed to expand its presence in Fiji, and open diplomatic posts in Solomon Islands, Tonga, and Kiribati, as has the United Kingdom (UK) in Tonga, Samoa, and Vanuatu. Having persuaded Solomon Islands and Kiribati to derecognise Taiwan in 2019, China established a substantial diplomatic presence in both.

Furthermore, partner states have indicated that they see multilateralism as a valuable tool of statecraft. Australia and New Zealand jealously guard their membership of most region's most significant multilateral regional institution focused on politics and security, the PIF. And other states keenly seek to engage with the PIF as dialogue partners. US Vice President Kamala Harris secured an invitation to give a virtual address to PIF leaders at their 2022 meeting. This diplomatic coup came about even though leaders had decided not to hold their customary PIF Dialogue Partner mechanism, due to fears that it might distract from the important tasks of repairing regional relationships and agreeing to the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent (the 2050 Strategy).[11]

Partner states are also increasingly seeking to create minilateral mechanisms to advance their reputations and roles. For example, the US, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, and the UK announced the Partners in the Blue Pacific (PBP) initiative in July 2022 (later adding Canada and Germany). The PBP is intended to enhance donor coordination with PICs. However, it remains to be seen whether mechanisms such as the PBP, which does not include PICs and may potentially side-line regional institutions such as the PIF, will influence PICs to have a positive opinion of partner states. For example, questions have been raised about whether their membership of the PBP initiative means that Australia and New Zealand see themselves as members of the PIF 'Forum family', or merely as 'partners' to the region.

Individual partner states also try to establish region-wide agreements, with China (unsuccessfully) seeking agreement to a proposed economic and security pact in April 2022. The US has had more success, hosting a meeting of PIC leaders with President Joe Biden at the White House in September 2022, and achieving agreement to a Declaration on US-Pacific Partnership largely built on the 2050 Strategy.[12]

Not all diplomatic tools of statecraft are positive; some are negative, with sanctions a clear example. For example, Australia, New Zealand, and the US implemented a raft of sanctions against the Fijian regimes that were involved in the 2000 and 2006 coups. Sanctions included suspending military cooperation, terminating certain aid, suspending some elements of government cooperation, and travel restrictions on senior members of the Fijian Government, military personnel, and others involved in the coups. In 2009 Australia led a successful push to suspend Fiji from the PIF and the Commonwealth.

But while sanctions are intended to coerce the target state to change its behaviour, they are not necessarily successful, and can have unintended consequences. For example, Australia, New Zealand, and the US's sanctions against the Fijian Government after the 2006 coup were arguably circumvented by Fijian Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama seeking closer relations with alternative partners guided by a 'Look North' foreign policy, including China and Russia. These developments led to the conclusion that Australia was 'close to exhausting its diplomatic options on Fiji to little apparent effect'.[13] Democratic elections were held again in Fiji in 2014 only after the coup-makers had changed the political system to ensure they would be elected – which they were.

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[11] Stephen Dziedzic (2022, 24 June) United States and China set to be excluded from Pacific Islands Forum meeting to avoid 'distraction'. ABC News.

[12] White House (2022) Declaration on U.S.-Pacific Partnership.

[13] Richard Kerr quoted in Philip Dorling (2010) 'Fiji totters on brink of ruin', *The Age*, 19 December.

The tools of statecraft

Soft power

Soft power has been defined as 'the ability to affect others by attraction and persuasion rather than just coercion and payment'.[14] This wide interpretation reflects our definition of influence, and arguably encompasses many of the economic, security and defence, and diplomatic statecraft tools we have identified.

Here, we interpret soft power more narrowly as the intentional deployment of mostly non-material resources to influence recipient states, actors, or individuals to develop positive beliefs, attitudes, and/or opinions about the partner state, or the partner state's worldview. Therefore, we identify common tools of soft power statecraft as including:

- people-to-people links, through cultural, sporting, education, and church linkages;

- governance programs, training, and exchanges;

- media distribution; and

- strategic narratives.

People-to-people links have attracted growing attention as a tool of statecraft. Indeed, as part of its Pacific step-up since 2018, Australia has explicitly aimed to build linkages through cultural, sporting, education, and church partnerships.

New Zealand already has relatively strong people-to-people links, primarily in Polynesia, because of its large Pacific diaspora. Beyond its links to its Pacific territories and freely associated states, in years past the US Peace Corps sent many volunteers to the region. After a decade-long decline, the US has committed to renewing its Peace Corps deployments.

Governance programs are another frequently used tool of statecraft, particularly by Australia and New Zealand between the late 1980s and early 2000s. The placement of Australian and New Zealand public servants and police in management positions in Pacific civil services not only influenced (and in some cases, arguably coerced, when these changes were conditional on aid) governance reforms in several PICs, but were also seen to have the benefit of developing relationships between Australians, New Zealanders, and their Pacific counterparts. However, this was not always the case – as resentment about the much more generous pay and conditions that Australians and New Zealanders received, as well as their attitude to local socio-political practices, frequently generated tensions.

Training, capacity-building, and exchanges have also been implemented frequently over the last several decades, particularly by Australia and New Zealand. Countless Pacific officials, police, and defence force personnel have attended Australia or New Zealand-run training courses, or engaged in exchanges with their Australian and New Zealand counterparts. Strong relationships developed through training have built trust between PIC government agencies and Australian and New Zealand officials, leading to diplomatic gains. The US and other partner states are looking to expand their role in this space.

Scholarships are also seen an important soft power tool, as educating Pacific people may facilitate their acceptance of the key norms and values of partner states offering educational opportunities. For example, through the Australia Awards Pacific Scholarships program, Australia has assisted thousands of Pacific people to study at Australian and regional tertiary institutions. The September 2022 Declaration on US-Pacific Partnership announced American support for support for education, training, youth development, and exchange opportunities. Similarly, there are large numbers of Pacific Islanders now studying in China.[15]

Media broadcasts and publications are another key soft power statecraft tool. As Martyn Namorong, a prominent PNG analyst, has commented: 'For many rural kids like myself, Radio Australia was a link to a wide world beyond the treelines.'[16]

This reflects that Australia and New Zealand have long been active in the media space, with Australia broadcasting Radio Australia and the Australia Network television service in the region, and New Zealand broadcasting RNZ. Following budget cuts between 2014-2016, Australian television and shortwave services were replaced with a FM service and web-stream. This was despite shortwave services providing a vital emergency service during natural disasters, particularly in places where there was limited internet access and no access to a FM radio signal.

China recognised the value of broadcasting as a soft power tool, and quickly signed a deal to broadcast TV news in Vanuatu. It has also taken-up many of the shortwave radio frequencies that Australia abandoned and has established Chinese newspapers in many PICs.

Media broadcasting links to our final element of soft power tools of statecraft: strategic narratives. Strategic narratives are 'a means for political actors to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international politics to shape the behaviour of domestic and international actors'.[17] If leaders can get their target states (and other actors) to 'buy into' their strategic narrative, this can 'shape their interests, their identity, and their understanding of how international relations works and where it is heading'.[18]

Partner states have recently deployed a series of strategic narratives in the Pacific Islands. Since 2018 Australia has adopted the narrative of 'Pacific family'. New Zealand has sought to frame itself as being a 'Pacific nation' sharing a 'Pacific identity' with the region based on its geography and demography. And, for the last two decades, China has promoted a strategic narrative of 'South-South cooperation', to frame itself as a fellow developing country that shares experiences and interests with PICs.

Both Indonesia and France have created strategic narratives built on their Pacific territories as necessarily making them part of the region. The US has vacillated between the historical embrace of its WWII legacy as a 'saviour', and its claim of being a Pacific nation. But both narratives carry the burden of the negative impacts of the consequences of nuclear testing and the legacy of American colonialism.

Although PICs' webs of statecraft are not the focus of this paper, it is worth noting that they have also deployed strategic narratives. The PIF's 'Blue Pacific' narrative, which was first formally articulated in the 2018 Boe Declaration on Regional Security, and recently reinforced with the adoption of the 2050 Strategy, seeks to influence partner states to recognise and respect the agency and autonomy of PICs, as well as the value they place on regionalism. These efforts have been successful, with partner states frequently adopting the term 'Blue Pacific' in their official discourse, and increasingly in the nomenclature of their activities,

including the PBP initiative. However, the latter example highlights how strategic narratives can be instrumentalised, with partner states arguably appropriating the Blue Pacific terminology to attempt to make their initiative appealing to the region, but in fact potentially undermining the intent of the Blue Pacific narrative by side-lining regional mechanisms.

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[15]Denghua Zhang and Jessica Marinaccio (2019) Chinese and Taiwanese Scholarships for Pacific Island Countries. Department of Pacific Affairs, ANU: Canberra

[16]Martyn Namorong quoted in Daniel Flitton (2014) 'Voiceless in the South Pacific', The Sydney Morning Herald, 29 August.

[17]Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin, and Laura Roselle (2013), Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order, New York: Routledge, 2.

[18]Ibid: 2.

The tools of statecraft

Grey-zone activities

Strategic narratives are increasingly promoted in the information (or cyber) domain, which is the focus of our final category of statecraft tool: grey-zone activities. While, as we note above, the Australian Government defines grey-zone activities broadly, in this paper we will focus on efforts to manipulate the information domain, including disinformation, and intelligence and espionage.

The information domain is increasingly the site of the deployment of disinformation campaigns whereby misleading information is used to benefit the source at the expense of the target. While disinformation campaigns are not new – front organisations, agent provocateurs, leafleting, forgeries, and propaganda have been around, in some cases, for millennia – technology has lowered the barriers to entry and facilitated their speed and spread in the information domain. Disinformation campaigns succeed when effectively exploiting prejudices, heuristics, and lived experiences and can affect voting intentions.[19] Disinformation campaigns may attempt to influence mass publics or may target certain political or social groups, including the diaspora of the disinforming state. For example, there has been an unsophisticated but coordinated online disinformation campaign regarding West Papua by Indonesia.[20]

While physical infrastructure often complicates access to the information domain in the Pacific Islands, mobile technology has improved access and facilitated the spread of disinformation.[21] For example, disinformation about the safety of COVID-19 vaccines provided by certain partner states has been rife across the Pacific Islands, particularly in PNG. A similar sentiment played out before the COVID-19 pandemic when non-state actors advocated vaccinate hesitancy in Samoa, which contributed to a measles epidemic.

Indeed, ostensibly fearing disinformation, the Solomon Islands Government temporarily banned Facebook – a major online forum for public political debate and information sharing in the region – in 2020. Some commentators speculated that Chinese authorities influenced this decision, which coincided with the controversial switch of diplomatic recognition to China.[22]

Intelligence and espionage are another grey-zone tool of statecraft that partner states have deployed across the Pacific Islands. Although by its nature opaque and secretive, a glimpse of the kind of activities in which partner states may be engaged was provided by the scandal surrounding allegations that the Australian Government spied on the Timor-Leste Government during negotiations over the split of oil and gas reserves in the Timor Gap.[23]

[19]Bergstrom, CT & Bak-Coleman, JB (2019) 'Gerrymandering in social networks', *Nature* 573 (5 September): 40-41.

[20]Dave McRae, Maria Del Mar Quiroga, Daniel Russo-Batterham, and Kim Doyle (2022) A pro-government disinformation campaign on Indonesian Papua. Harvard Kennedy Mis-information Review.

[21]Amanda H. A. Watson, Joseph Kim Suwamaru, Ioana Chan Mow, Sarah Logan (2017) 'Mobile Technology in Pacific Island Countries: The Potential for M-Government' in Rowena Cullen and Graham Hassall (eds) Achieving Sustainable E-Government in Pacific Island States, New York: Springer

[22]Dorothy Wickham and Ben Doherty (2020, 17 November) Solomon Islands government preparing to ban Facebook. The Guardian.

[23]Christopher Knaus (2019, 10 August) Witness K and the 'outrageous' spy scandal that failed to shame Australia. The Guardian.

Conclusion

While we have presented the main categories of statecraft tools sequentially, our characterisation of the webs of statecraft that partner states are weaving in the Pacific Islands is intended to capture the fact that these tools (whether attempting influence or coercion) interrelate with at times reinforcing, intersecting with, or undermining another.

The webs of statecraft being woven by individual states can also reinforce, intersect with, or undermine those of other partner states.

Our characterisation of the web of statecraft is also intended to reflect that **statecraft tools, particularly those that seek to influence, rather than to directly coerce, frequently have primary, secondary, and even tertiary, goals and targets.** For example, a state may use a tool of statecraft to try to coerce a primary target state to change its behaviour, but with the intention (or hope) that this also influences secondary target states, which perhaps change their beliefs based on the behaviour of the primary target. This may be the case with respect to some of China's activities in the region, with suggestions that, while the Solomon Islands Government is the primary target of the Solomon Islands-China security

agreement, the secondary targets may be Australia, New Zealand, and the US, all of which feel threatened by the potential for a Chinese military presence in the region. By sending a warning to them about its potential military role in the Pacific Islands, China may be seeking to change their behaviour in its areas of direct strategic interest, such as the East and South China Seas.

States attempting to deploy tools of statecraft may themselves become caught in their own web if their actions have unintended or unanticipated consequences. A state may use a tool of statecraft to influence or coerce a target state to change its policy – such as its diplomatic recognition – but then become dependent on that target state to maintain that policy. For example, Taiwan relies on diplomatic recognition by a diminishing number of PICs. In Solomon Islands, the Malaita provincial government has used Taiwan's interest to further its struggle for power and resources.[24]

This highlights that **target states and actors in the Pacific are not necessarily being trapped in the webs that external powers are weaving, and some have instrumentalised them for their own domestic and/or international gain.** Many Pacific states and actors have themselves woven webs to influence or coerce external states in the pursuit of their own interests, often using tools of Oceanic diplomacy,[25] which will be explored in a subsequent paper. The success of PICs in influencing Australia and the US to take serious action to address climate change is an example.

Our characterisation of webs of statecraft also highlights that **there is not necessarily a neat causal relationship between a partner state deploying a range of tools of statecraft in the region, and it influencing or coercing a target PIC, or Pacific actors, communities, and/or individuals.** If there was such a relationship, then Australia – by far the largest aid donor and with the most extensive security,

development, and diplomatic presence – should have been able to prevent, for example, the Solomon Islands Government from signing its security agreement with China.

This highlights that the exercise of power is always relational, rather than unilateral or passively received. While much commentary on China's web of statecraft has assumed that PICs and other Pacific actors are 'passive dupes',[26] China's **attempts to influence or coerce – and those of all partner states – are mediated by their targets, which each possess agency and operate within unique political structures and sociopolitical cultures.**

Finally, while for analytical simplicity we have focused on the tools of statecraft being deployed by partner states, **national governments are not the only ones pursuing statecraft.** For example, China acts not only through its central ministries, but through a variety of other actors, ranging from provincial authorities, to state-owned enterprises, to ostensibly private associations, and even individuals. And this also applies for PICs and other Pacific actors, who range the regional, national, sub-national, community, and individual levels. Focusing only on what national governments do misses these complex webs of authority and influence.

These complexities highlight why Australia, its partners, and PICs need to better understand the webs of statecraft being woven in the Pacific Islands to avoid being entangled in them. Our ongoing project seeks to achieve this.

[24]The discussion that follows draws on: Joanne Wallis and Czes Tubilewicz (2022) Alarm over China-Solomon Islands deal brushes over limits of our 'influence' in Pacific, Sydney Morning Herald, 20 April.

[25]Salā George Carter, Greg Fry and Gordon Nanau (2021) Oceanic Diplomacy: An Introduction. Department of Pacific Affairs, ANU: Canberra.

[26]Powles, A, Wallis, J & Newton Cain, T (2018) Chinese whispers and Pacific agency, Lowy Interpreter, 22 October.

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Photo credits

Page 1- adli-wahid-m1Pk_ZqcG-Y-unsplash - Port Vila Vanuatu.jpeg

Page 5 - Australian Department of Defence Australian Army Corporal Charley Gledhill from Joint Task Group 637.3 assists members from the Royal Solomon Island Police Force in planning a patrol route during a multi-agency policing patrol at the Port of Honiara, Solomon Islands on 15 December 2021.

Page 9 - Australian Department of Defence. Australian Army Medic, Private Daniel Hanckel and Australian Army Nursing Officer Lieutenant Samantha Dowdney prepare COVID-19 vaccines at a Vaccination Outreach Clinic at Lightning Ridge in New South Wales.

Page 10 - Australian Department of Defence. Australian Defence Force and Papua New Guinea Defence Force personnel support the Morobe Provincial Health Authority with COVID-19 outreach sessions to raise vaccination awareness with villages and organisations in Morobe Province, Papua New Guinea.

Page 13 - Australian Department of Defence. Australian Defence Force and Royal Solomon Islands Police Force (RSIPF) personnel attend the graduation ceremony for RSIPF Explosive Ordnance Disposal course at Hells Point, Guadalcanal.

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