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NEW INSTRUMENTS FOR CHINA'S COMPETITION FOR LEADERSHIP IN THE SOUTH PACIFIC REGION (THE SPR)

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ABSTRACT

This study examines and details the new instruments the PRC is using to compete for leadership with Australia in the South Pacific region. The implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for small island states in the South Pacific are also detailed, including both health and economic risks. In conclusion the author highlights new Chinese instruments of rivalry for leadership in the South Pacific, such as: 1. Vaccine diplomacy, 2. Infrastructure projects, 3. The geopolitical strengthening of China. Although Australia as a middle power cannot economically compete with China, especially in terms of financial investments into infrastructure projects and the strength of its military power, the historically established close ties with island states, articulated shared values, broad-based development assistance and "vaccine diplomacy" are factors of Australia's effectiveness in maintaining its leadership in the South Pacific when competing with China and maintaining the status quo in the subregion nowadays.

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Introduction. Prior to the 2008 global financial crisis, it could be said that Australia was able to achieve sole leadership in the South Pacific. However, the 2008 economic crisis provided an opportunity for China to gain a foothold in the South Pacific region and compete with Australia. This competition for leadership continues to the present day. These states compete on some tracks and also use different instruments to maintain their leadership.

The following **traditional PRC instruments** are worth noting: 1. Huge financial investments by the PRC, both for development purposes and as part of One Road One Belt initiative, 2. Support of players that are opposing Australia's leadership in the SPR (mainly Fiji).

Before considering the PRC's new instruments to maintain its leadership in the SPR, it is worth noting how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the sub-region itself.

The COVID-19 pandemic is truly global and has impacted on livelihoods, development and processes in all regions of the world and the South Pacific is no exception.

COVID-19 has caused **two problems** for small and micro states in the South Pacific: while the **health** of Pacific islanders is the main threat, **economic disaster** is a more serious threat.

Six South Pacific states (Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, Papua New Guinea, Fiji, French Polynesia, Guam and New Caledonia) reported 249 cases and 7 deaths [4]. This relatively low infection rate can be explained by the geographical distance from the main pandemic foci, the fact that these countries are unpopular for tourism, and the fact that states in the region quickly closed borders and adopted effective social distancing measures (Herr, R. and Bergin, A., 2020).

Speaking of **health threats**, COVID-19 can be particularly devastating for island states (especially in densely populated areas) as there is an uneven distribution and often inadequate quality

of health services and facilities across the region. Moreover, researchers from New Zealand also warned that Pacific islanders may be more susceptible to a pandemic than Europeans. For example, during the 2009 influenza (H1N1) pandemic in New Zealand, hospitalisation rates were seven times higher for Pacific Islanders than for other New Zealanders (Herr, R. and Bergin, A., 2020).

The bigger problem, however, is **economic**. Because of the island countries' dependence on grants, tourism and imports, the pandemic has a more direct impact on their economies. Even if tourism-based economies have not closed their borders, the flow of tourists to the region has still been cut off: airlines do not fly and cruise ships do not sail. And the overall economic downturn caused by the pandemic has affected demand for the region's export products. Reduced trade threatens food security as many islands depend on food imports. Even countries with no confirmed cases of the virus (Solomon Islands, Tonga and Samoa) now have to cope with the economic costs of reduced trade, loss of tourism revenue and costs of preventive health measures. Job losses were estimated to be catastrophic in Vanuatu (40%) and Fiji (25%). As a consequence, the pandemic has created new opportunities for criminals: the number of boats carrying cocaine and methamphetamine from Latin America destined for Australia has increased dramatically in Southeast Asia. Human smuggling has also been observed: boats often make illegal trips to distant islands and are involved in smuggling drugs, alcohol and cigarettes. Human trafficking is currently of particular concern in the South Pacific (Bergin, A., 2021).

If one asks whether **the geopolitical position** in the SPR subregion has somehow changed because of COVID-19, the author concludes that it has not: there is still competition between the two leaders of the subregion - Australia and China for leadership; the pandemic has simply opened another avenue for competition.

Results and Discussion. Below, the author examines the new tools that the PRC is using to assert its leadership in the South Pacific:

1. Vaccine diplomacy. According to analyst company Airfinity, as of 2021, China had donated 270 000 vaccines to the Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu [1]. It is important to note that Chinese efforts are not limited to the vaccine issue only, it is also increasing its influence in other areas related to pandemic assistance to countries in the South Pacific. For example, in early March, China quickly initiated a videoconference with all South Pacific Small Island States. The videoconference coincided with the launch of **the China-Pacific Island Countries anti-COVID-19 Cooperation Fund**. At a cost of \$1.9 million, the fund provided the Pacific Island countries with funds to purchase medical equipment from Chinese companies.

Such Chinese COVID-19 public relations campaigns pose a serious challenge to Australia and the West in countering Chinese influence in the SPR. This influence is aimed at undermining and corrupting the vulnerable democratic institutions of the South Pacific island states in the interests of a Sinocentric realignment of states in close proximity to China, and China's long-term ambitions include the establishment of a military base in the Pacific (Citowicki, Ph., 2020).

Australia's response can be seen in **the Pacific Step-up** and the 2020 **Partnerships for Recovery: Australia's COVID-19 Development Response**, as well as in the Morrison government's pledge to send 15 million doses of coronavirus vaccine to countries in the Pacific and Timor-Leste by mid-2022, helping Australia to stay ahead of China in 'vaccine diplomacy' to strengthen its regional influence. Australia has already provided more than 500 000 promised doses (Scott, J., 2021).

2. Infrastructure projects. Over the past two decades, Beijing has achieved a massive financial presence in Oceania. Between 2010 and 2020, the PRC provided \$1.76 billion in development assistance to oceanic states. It has become a key donor in the SPR. Moreover, the amount of aid provided by China exceeded that of Japan (\$1.52 billion, 2010-2020) and the US (\$1.49 billion, 2010-2020). This is not surprising, as the PRC's development assistance includes Southeast Asian countries in the One Belt, One Road (OBOR) initiative. As of 2020, there are nine oceanic states that have joined the OBOR initiative: Papua New Guinea, Fiji, New Zealand, Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Niue, Samoa, Tonga and Vanuatu (Garin, A., 2020).

China's active provision of loans and grants to the South Pacific countries has been echoed in statements by Australian officials. For example, in 2018, Australia's minister for international development, commenting on Chinese projects in Oceania, accused Beijing of building 'useless buildings' and 'roads to nowhere'. Against the backdrop of the potential benefits for Oceania from foreign aid, one of the most discussed issues in the context of China's growing influence in the SPR has been the debt of island states, which, according to Australian authorities, not only threatens their

economic well-being, but also the likely shift in foreign policy vector towards the PRC under pressure from credit obligations (Pozdnyakov, E., 2020).

Not surprisingly, Australia and its ally Japan have increased their interest and investment in infrastructure projects in the South Pacific region; moreover, Australia, Japan and the US have announced an alternative infrastructure project to the OBOR initiative - the Blue Dot Network - but none of these efforts can yet compete with the Chinese infrastructure project.

3. China's geopolitical consolidation. In 2018 the PRC signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Minister of Fisheries of Papua- New Genie (PNG) and the Governor of Western Province to build a "comprehensive, multifunctional fisheries industrial park" on Daru Island at a cost of \$200 million. China later signed an agreement with PNG for the direct export of significant amounts of seafood from PNG to China. It is important to note here that Daru Island is the closest PNG island to Australia and is only 200 kilometres from the Australian mainland. This is very close to the Torres Strait Islands, which are a weak point in Australia's northern maritime border because of security concerns. While the fact of Chinese fishing does not itself pose any problems, if the project goes beyond the Memorandum and ends up becoming a Chinese port, geographically very close to Australia, it will begin to pose a threat and it is also not in Australia's strategic interest to have a major Chinese state resource exploration project right at its northern doorstep (Bergin, A., 2021).

Moreover, there have been a number of recent incidents that have heightened concerns about the prospect of a Chinese military base. The prospect of a large Chinese-funded jetty on the larger but less populated island of Vanuatu being converted into a 'dual-use' facility has been leaked to the press. Australia and the United States quickly partnered with Papua New Guinea to re-establish naval facilities on Manus Island to increase ongoing operations against illegal fishing, but to keep out China. Such examples are likely to arise more and more in the coming years (Pryke, J., 2020).

Australia's response to such military buildup is a reciprocal military buildup in Australia. The Australian government plans to increase its defence budget to 2% of GDP. For 2020-2021, Canberra has already allocated \$30 billion for defence (Garin, A., 2020).

Conclusions. To sum up, prior to the 2008 global financial crisis, it can be said that Australia was able to achieve sole leadership of the SPR. However, the 2008 economic crisis provided an opportunity for China to gain a foothold in the South Pacific region and compete with Australia. This competition for leadership continues to the present day. These states compete on some tracks and also use different instruments to maintain their leadership.

The following **traditional PRC instruments** are worth noting: 1. Huge financial investments by the PRC, both for development purposes and as part of One Road One Belt initiative, 2. Support of players that are opposing Australia's leadership in the SPR (mainly Fiji).

The COVID-19 pandemic is truly global and has impacted on livelihoods, development and processes in all regions of the world, including the South Pacific. However, the geopolitical position of the SPR in the pandemic has not changed significantly: there is still competition between the two leaders of the subregion - Australia and China for leadership; the pandemic has simply opened up additional tracks for competition. In this regard, it is worth highlighting new tracks of China's competition in the South Pacific for leadership: 1. Vaccine diplomacy (not only the supply of vaccines, but also a set of other measures to help the South Pacific countries cope with the pandemic and its consequences), 2. Infrastructure projects (One Belt, One Road), 3. Geopolitical strengthening of China.

Although Australia as a middle power cannot economically compete with China, especially in terms of financial investments into infrastructure projects and the strength of its military power, the historically established close ties with island states, articulated shared values, broad-based development assistance and "vaccine diplomacy" are factors of Australia's effectiveness in maintaining its leadership in the South Pacific when competing with China and maintaining the status quo in the subregion nowadays.

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