

The big problem with Labor's 'Plan to Build a Stronger Pacific Family'

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China's recent decision to abandon a multilateral security agreement with 10 countries in the South Pacific was a cause for both enormous relief and some measure of self-congratulations in Canberra and Washington.

It should have prompted neither.

The proposed deal was intended to be a key agenda item in Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi's recently concluded 10-day tour of eight Pacific countries. Wang was just beaten to the punch by Australia's Foreign Minister Penny Wong, who arrived in Fiji on a hastily organized visit hours prior to Wang's arrival in the region on May 26.

Yet the decision of many Pacific Island countries to pass up Beijing's offer was more a product of their political savvy than clever diplomatic maneuvering from Canberra or Washington. For too long views on Pacific Island nations' foreign relations have ran contrary to the consensus view in modern international relations studies, which holds that small states are highly capable of exerting agency and protecting their autonomy in ways that defy the asymmetric nature of their relationships with major powers. This very point was recently alluded to by President of Timor-Leste Jose Ramos-Horta, who in the wake of the failed deal [noted](#) that Pacific island countries 'have learnt how to play superpower rivalry to their benefit.'

China will also take home valuable lessons from its premature foray into establishing a broader security foothold in the region. Beijing's regional ambitions have brought superpower rivalry to a region long accustomed to the unchallenged hegemony of the Australia-U.S. alliance. Yet China appears to have mistaken Pacific Island countries' appetite for exploiting the benefits of this rivalry with an enthusiasm for Chinese leadership.

Beijing may have misread developments in the 2019 Pacific Forum, when Fiji's prime minister and regional heavyweight Frank Bainimarama [claimed](#) Beijing's people were 'definitely better' than the 'very insulting, very condescending' then-Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison. Kiribati's former president, Anote Tong, similarly [imputed](#) that Beijing is the 'lesser of the two evils.' What this really showed was that Beijing's arrival as a regional player opened up an opportunity for island nations to defiantly renegotiate their relationship with Canberra. It made little sense that the region would want Beijing to replace Canberra in the very role that Chinese competition had helped them reshape.

Yet this is also why relief over Beijing's failure to secure a deal is premature. Not only is this merely China's first salvo in an intensifying geostrategic power game, but the newly elected Labor government in Canberra also appears to still misunderstand the agency and priorities of Pacific Island nations. Continuing to do so could well provide China the opening it needs to make greater inroads on its next attempt.

One example is that Labor has developed a 10-point ‘[Plan to Build a Stronger Pacific Family](#)’ in order to ‘regain Australia’s position as the partner of choice in the Pacific.’ Unfortunately, nations in the region don’t want Australia ‘regaining’ the mantle it occupied before – they want Australia to accept that their role and identity in the region has changed. Moreover, to the extent that this statement is meant to imply that island nations can be cajoled into choosing Canberra over Beijing – especially in the domain of security – then it could be argued that Canberra is framing its engagement in a way that is less than optimal.

Some preposterous things have recently been said about Australia by Solomon Island’s Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare. But his suggestion that island nations should henceforth seek multiple security partners, as opposed to a single and potentially overbearing one, makes some sense.

Australian National University scholar Evelyn Goh has argued that small nations in Southeast Asia have benefited from what she calls an ‘omni-enmeshment’ strategy aimed at securing concomitant security and other agreements with competing major powers. Among the benefits of this strategy is that small states can exploit larger nations’ capacities to combat different security problems, while limiting their facility to leverage these security contributions to diminish the small state’s autonomy. Such a strategy can help small states delay or escape being locked in on either side of a high stakes, zero-sum battle for geostrategic supremacy – even to the extent that it could have a positive impact on the competitive behavior of rival powers. Most importantly, as Goh argued, this can even occur when the small states in question tacitly seek to perpetuate, as opposed to overturn, the geostrategic advantages of the established power which has traditionally maintained security in the region (in the case of Southeast Asia, the United States).

On this point, Wong would do well to keep in mind a recommendation outlined in a recent Carnegie [report](#) on Beijing’s influence in Eastern, Central and Southeastern Europe. This report states that while Western countries should communicate latent dangers in Beijing’s influence game, small nations shouldn’t be viewed as a potential ‘trojan horse’ for Chinese influence, nor should the security ramifications of agreements with China be overstated. Indeed, pushing too hard against Chinese influence could be spun by Beijing as the very thing that Canberra explicitly says it opposes – an attempt to erode small states’ autonomy.

The reality is that China will probably make inroads in securing security agreements with Pacific Island countries in spite of incessant warnings against doing so emanating from Canberra or Washington. But these need not be seen as diplomatic defeats by Australia, nor as necessarily dangerous developments. They will happen largely because security is an amorphous rather than a clearly defined concept in very small, fragile nations where sources of insecurity, even those that pose a potentially existential threat, often appear omnipresent and constantly impending. Aside from the often mentioned issue of climate change, threats to micro-nations in the Pacific can include a plethora of issues ranging from [organized crime](#), illegal fishing and [overfishing](#), natural disasters and pandemics, to the pilfering of natural resources and social conflicts.

In part, Pacific Island countries’ tendency to often [single out](#) Canberra for its inaction on climate change – despite Beijing having made far weaker commitments and producing [ever greater](#) CO2 emissions – is a product of an attempt to educate major powers about this reality, and advance the desirability of competing powers coming together to battle this plethora of security challenges, as opposed to predominantly defining security in more conventional geostrategic terms.

While Canberra’s Pacific strategy will no doubt retain a geostrategic focus, understanding other states’ view of security as a spectrum, as opposed to a category, will help Australian diplomacy in the South Pacific. While the new Labor government has made inroads by placing a greater emphasis on combatting climate change, this should only be the beginning. First, understanding the omnipresence of security threats will help Canberra appreciate that turning back offers for security assistance is always going to present a difficult proposition for fragile micro-states.

Also, given that the boundaries between security and non-security can appear amorphous to the latter, the red lines separating agreements that will protect as opposed to erode sovereignty are likely to come across to Pacific nations as less linear than is the case with major powers. Attempts to dictate linear red lines – as Morrison clumsily attempted to do in his [criticisms](#) of the Solomon Islands’ recent security deal with Beijing – are likely to continue to face backlashes. Ultimately, Canberra and Washington would be better off sharing information and intelligence on China’s influence game with its South Pacific partners, and let local leaders,

who should know their security situation and value their autonomy more than anyone, stay in the driver's seat in defining where the red lines on security cooperation are.

While the above largely reflects an old problem with Australia's diplomacy in the South Pacific, there is also a newer cause for concern in the Labor government's plan, which is also mentioned in the Carnegie report: an overreliance on soft power. There is a tendency to define the failings of Australia's Pacific diplomacy as largely the product of the ideological leanings and moral failings of political opponents, rather than the result of a prominent geostrategic shift in the region. In keeping with that, Labor's Stronger Pacific Family plan places an excessive emphasis on 'smarter' diplomacy, cultural sensitivity and soft power – including its emphasis on people-to-people relations, broadcasting, and '[deepening cultural and sporting ties](#).' It could well be argued that the Labor plan would be stronger if it did the opposite – if it was recalibrated to move away from Western social trends and address more fundamental problems that are aligned with where Pacific Islands are in terms of their hierarchy of needs.

China's soft power game has improved markedly in recent times, helped along by their [exploitation](#) of what the Taiwanese [call](#) 'pandemic prevention diplomacy.' But the core pillar of Beijing's aid diplomacy is still that it can and will build what other donor nations can't or won't. There is a compelling logic behind the premise that meeting material needs is a more enduring foundation for international partnerships than forging ideological or sentimental bonds, which may not outlive transitions of power. And where Beijing struggles, as the Carnegie report outlines, the reason is not that its promises are not valued – it is rather that China often fails to deliver, or delivers at a high cost to the environment and workers' rights, growing debt, or an erosion of foreign policy autonomy.

Australia needs to be awake to this kind of thinking. Too strong an emphasis on 'kinship' via the 'Pacific family' plan will likely come across as disingenuous – especially if it is not backed up with effective action. The focus, thus, should be on hitting the benchmarks Australia's programs set, meeting locally defined needs without imposing heavy costs, or, at the least, helping fragile nations become resilient enough that they can be more immune to elite capture or quasi-subjugation by rival foreign powers. Unfortunately, on each of these metrics, the success of Australia's aid engagement with many countries in the region has hitherto been at best modest.

Inaugurated in 2016, the Morrison government's Pacific Step-Up has sought to at least address some of the more pressing infrastructure problems of Pacific nations over the long term. But a brief perusal of the figures shows that Western aid has brought very little in terms of positive short-term outcomes and has contributed little to transforming economies in the region. For instance, despite the [World Bank's Doing Business index in 2020](#) showing that 'developing economies are catching up with developed economies in ease of doing business,' Pacific Island nations plummeted in the rankings between 2016 and 2020, with drops in Fiji, Solomon Islands, Samoa, Federated States of Micronesia, Kiribati, and Vanuatu. Per capita GDP dropped or barely moved in states including Fiji, Solomon Islands, and Samoa during the same period.

Where the figures are not bad, it is often because they are not anywhere to be found. This weak commitment to compiling a more comprehensive record of official OECD/World Bank etc. development indicators in the region is puzzling, because Australia can't show the material benefits of its aid or infrastructure investments if it can't or doesn't measure them. And if Canberra can't do that, it offers a free kick to rival powers whose contributions, such as massive sporting stadiums for Solomon Islands' Pacific Games, are more visually and viscerally impactful than value-adding and sustainable.

Other countries are waking up to Pacific nations' agency and geostrategic nous following their rejection of Beijing's multilateral security pact. In diplomatic dealings henceforth, Pacific Island countries should be treated less as 'little brothers' in Australia's 'Pacific family' and more as rational bargainers. On this point, Labor's promise for 'better diplomacy' should not veer into overemphasizing gestures at the expense of substance. Australia's diplomacy needs to be grounded on a sober awareness of how ongoing geostrategic shifts have altered power differentials between Australia and other nations in the region. And with this in mind, Canberra should start with a focus on better delivery and a lowering of the price tag, and make a marked shift on where Canberra's 'red lines' are drawn in relation to island countries' security agreements with other nations. This probably won't be enough to win over the Pacific. But it might be enough to stop Canberra from losing it forever.

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