

TRANSNATIONAL ORGANIZED CRIME
AND THE PACIFIC ISLANDS SERIES



**GLOBAL
INITIATIVE**
AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL
ORGANIZED CRIME

POLITICS AT PLAY

GEOPOLITICS AND ORGANIZED
CRIME IN THE PACIFIC

Virginia Comolli

MARCH 2024

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author wishes to thank the many Pacific islanders, as well as foreign law enforcement, government officials, non-governmental and multilateral organizations, journalists, academics and analysts who, by sharing their knowledge, insight and contacts, either in person or online, have informed this policy brief and helped to review its content.

The author would also like to thank Louise Taylor, Mark Shaw and Martin Thorley at the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) for their feedback; Brett Pepler, Anouk Ride and Tess Newton Cain, who acted as external reviewers; and the GI-TOC's Publications team.

This report was funded by a grant from the United States Department of State. The opinions, findings and conclusions stated herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the United States Department of State.



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FROM VISION TO ACTION: A DECADE OF ANALYSIS, DISRUPTION AND RESILIENCE

The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime was founded in 2013. Its vision was to mobilize a global strategic approach to tackling organized crime by strengthening political commitment to address the challenge, building the analytical evidence base on organized crime, disrupting criminal economies and developing networks of resilience in affected communities. Ten years on, the threat of organized crime is greater than ever before and it is critical that we continue to take action by building a coordinated global response to meet the challenge.

ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
COFA	Compact of Free Association
FAS	Freely Associated States
FSM	Federated States of Micronesia
IUU	Illegal, unreported and unregulated (in relation to fishing)
OMCG	Outlaw motorcycle gang
PIF	Pacific Islands Forum
PNG	Papua New Guinea
RAMSI	Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands
RMI	Republic of the Marshall Islands
SIAF	Solomons International Assistance Force



INTRODUCTION

Although more commonly thought of for their natural beauty and isolation, the island countries and territories of the Pacific are moving from the periphery to the centre of geopolitical dynamics, including licit and illicit transnational trade.

In recent years, international engagement with the region has surged and brought intense geopolitical competition among regional and global powers active in the Pacific, especially Australia, the United States and China. This competition for regional influence has been played out in trade deals, security agreements, financial aid and capacity building, high-level political visits, formal allegiances and diplomatic recognition.

The transnational organized crime landscape has reacted to these developments by shifting towards more pervasive and diverse illicit markets, building on the ever-increasing connection between regions, especially Asia, the Americas and Oceania. The actors driving illicit activities have also multiplied and diversified.

This policy brief, the first in a series of papers mapping these developments, aims to provide an overview of the geopolitical context in which criminality is taking root. Diplomatic and commercial interests have a major impact on the local and international response to organized criminal activities (as explored in detail in another paper in this series) and therefore it would be naïve to embark on an analysis of criminal trends and actors without taking this backdrop into account. Moreover, any analysis needs to factor in the differences between Pacific island countries and territories as well as their particular vulnerabilities.

The islands vary in population size, ranging from a few thousand inhabitants to over 10 million in the case of Papua New Guinea (PNG); political systems (both formal and traditional); availability of natural resources; level of economic development (Solomon Islands, Kiribati and Tuvalu are among the world's least developed countries);¹ civil society capacity and activity; and in their overall public sector capacity to counter organized crime (including corruption and financial intelligence and cyber-crime capabilities). The Pacific island countries and territories are home to a highly diverse population, with hundreds of spoken languages and numerous tribes and clans. While mostly peaceful in the modern era, some islands have experienced violence and conflict in recent memory, including separatist and independence movements such as that in Bougainville during the 1990s.

Overshadowing everything is the tangible threat of climate change, which, according to Pacific national leaders, represents 'the single greatest threat to the livelihoods, security and well-being of the peoples of the Pacific'.²

This brief will first provide an overview of the geopolitical context as it relates to security and other provisions that directly or indirectly relate to crime and law enforcement. It will focus on the countries that are most involved in the current geopolitical competition. This is not to suggest that they are the only ones with a presence and interests in the region. It is worth noting other dynamics at play. Indonesia and Malaysia, for instance, have strong commercial interests in industries such as fishing, mining and logging. Furthermore, the Pacific islands have traditionally been among the strongest supporters of West Papua's bid for independence from Indonesia (although this has waned due to Indonesian efforts to strengthen diplomatic ties with the rest of the region).³ India has strong cultural ties and trade links with Fiji owing to the large Indian population living on the islands and has shown an interest in the broader region. This has included the establishment of the Forum for India–Pacific Islands Cooperation in 2014. At the 2023 forum in PNG, Prime Minister James Marape urged Indian premier Narendra Modi to represent and amplify the voices of the Pacific islands and the Global South in G7 summits to mitigate their role as 'victims of global power play'.⁴

After painting the geopolitical picture, the second half of this policy brief will discuss the key drivers and patterns of organized crime in the region and how these have affected the Pacific islands in the 21st century. Foreign presence and influence has three main impacts on organized crime: altering the patterns of criminality in the islands; providing external support to build the capacity to fight criminal activity; and determining, through political and diplomatic priorities, the amount of attention that is given to combating crime and corruption.



HISTORICAL AND GEOPOLITICAL CONTEXT

External influence is not a new phenomenon for the Pacific islands. The first European explorers arrived in the area in the 1500s, paving the way for an era of colonization in the 18th and 19th centuries and then occupation during World War II by Britain, France, Germany, Spain, Portugal, the Netherlands, the US, Australia, New Zealand and Japan.⁵ The colonial experience, which lasted until the mid-20th century, deeply shaped the social, economic and political landscape of the islands. Indeed, it was accompanied by the introduction of new diseases, the displacement of local populations from their ancestral lands, cultural assimilation, including the arrival of Christian missionaries, and environmental destruction through resource extraction and nuclear testing by France, Britain and the US.⁶

When this era came to an end in the last quarter of the 20th century, the region emerged as a collection of islands with complex and diverse forms of state and territorial governance. Western Samoa (now Samoa), Fiji, Tonga, PNG, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Kiribati, Nauru and Tuvalu gained full independence. Meanwhile, other islands retained ties to former colonial powers with varying degrees of autonomy and enthusiasm for the arrangements. The Cook Islands and Niue are self-governing states in free association with New Zealand; Tokelau is a non-self-governing territory of New Zealand; French Polynesia and New Caledonia are among France's semi-autonomous overseas collectivities; American Samoa, the Northern Mariana Islands and Guam are unincorporated territories of the US; while Palau, the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) and the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM) are independent countries in Compacts of Free Association (COFA) with the US.⁷

Australia, the Cook Islands, Fiji, Nauru, New Zealand, Tonga and Western Samoa established the South Pacific Forum in 1971 as a regional bloc to address political, social and economic concerns and foster cooperation. It later became the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) in 1999. At present, its membership comprises Australia, the Cook Islands, the FSM, Fiji, French Polynesia, Kiribati, Nauru, New Caledonia, New Zealand, Niue, Palau, PNG, the RMI, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu.⁸

PNG, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu formed the Melanesian Spearhead Group in 1986, of which Fiji and the Kanak Socialist National Liberation Front of New Caledonia also became members. One of its purposes is the furthering of New Caledonia's continued struggle for independence from France.⁹



FIGURE 1 Pacific island countries and territories.

In the 21st century, China has become a major foreign presence in the Pacific. China's expanding role has prompted other powers, whose interest had dwindled, to 're-discover' the region. Islands that had seemed peripheral, all of a sudden, felt much less remote and strategically marginal. For this reason, while acknowledging countries' pre-existing relationships with Pacific islands, a series of recent political manoeuvres by Australia, the US and others can be best understood as direct or indirect responses to Chinese initiatives in the region.

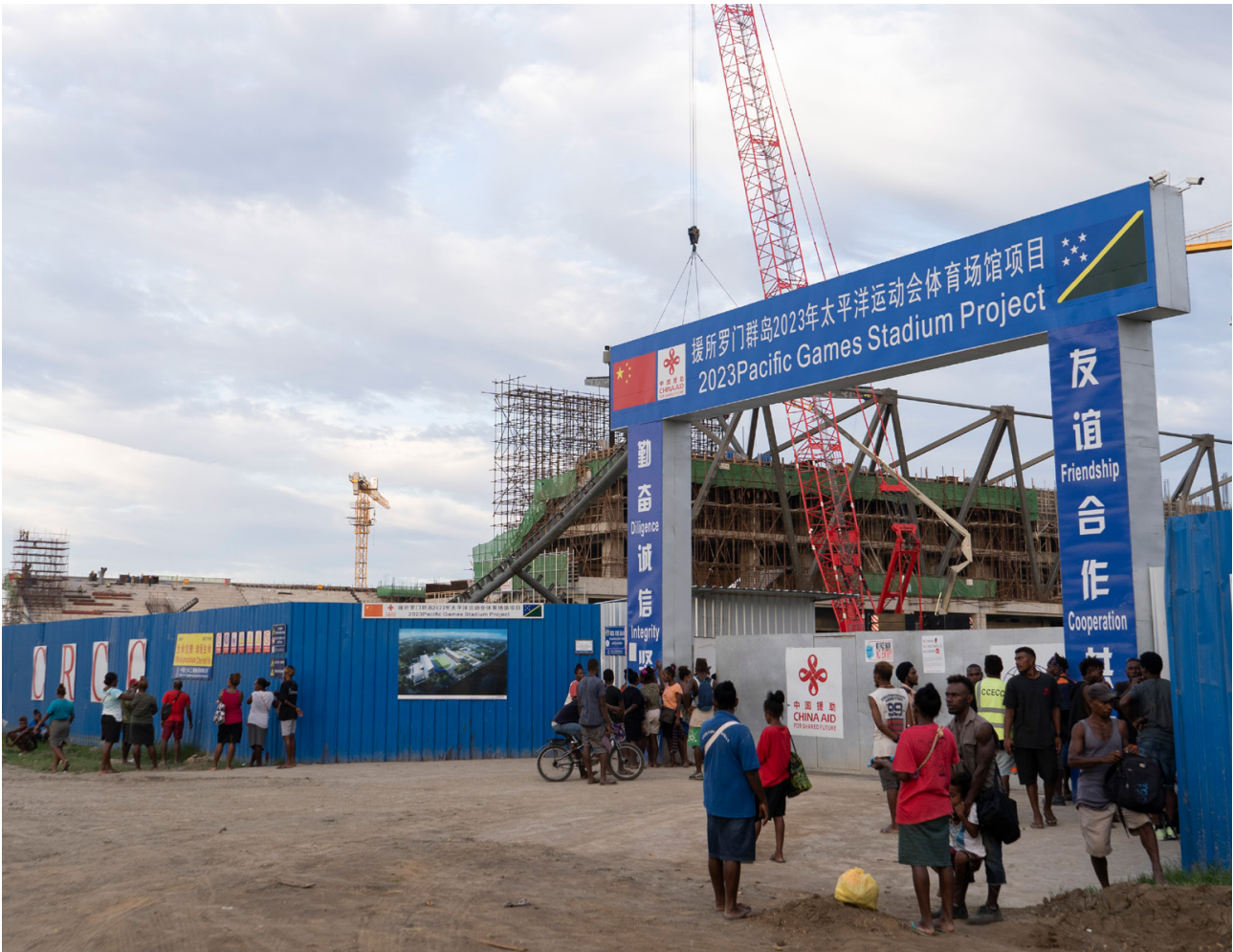
China

This Western pivot towards the Pacific has not gone unnoticed in Beijing. Chinese diplomats have accused Australia, the US and others of adopting a Cold War mentality and engaging in neo-colonialism by undermining China's relationships with Pacific nations on law enforcement and police cooperation for the sake of geopolitical rivalry.¹⁰

From a Chinese perspective, its efforts in the region are driven by clear diplomatic, economic and security considerations, which have significantly impacted, if not transformed, these three sectors.

Economic interests

From Beijing's perspective, US engagement in other parts of the world in the early 2000s, particularly the Middle East, created opportunities in the South West Pacific. This coincided with the beginning



Construction workers and their relatives wait to get paid outside the US\$50 million stadium that China was building as a gift to the Solomon Islands ahead of the 2023 Pacific Games. © Michael Miller/
The Washington Post via Getty Images

of a more outward-looking phase for China. Part of this was commercially driven, with a growing need for natural resources that could be channelled back into its domestic market. In this regard, the timber- and mineral-rich Solomon Islands and PNG became appealing targets. At present, the bulk of these countries' exports already end up in China. The same can be said of their fish stocks, a key resource for many Pacific islands, which collectively manage the world's largest tuna fishery. Diminishing reserves in Chinese waters resulting from overfishing have prompted Chinese fishing vessels to travel ever-greater distances to secure their catch. Such commercial activities are marred with illegality and, as this series will elucidate, a substantial proportion of logging, mining and fishing is conducted illegally. Additionally, Chinese fishing fleets are believed to be involved in surveillance and some analysts caution that in the long term China might use its distant-water fleet as a tool for asserting territorial control, especially when accompanied by the China Coast Guard.¹¹

China has sought to incorporate 10 Pacific island nations into the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Beijing's flagship programme for infrastructural development and trade (among other aspects). Multiple private and state-owned Chinese companies have engaged with Pacific countries to build and redevelop ports and airstrips. However, as China has decreased its aid contribution over the last few years, it has shifted to projects that are smaller and more politically targeted.¹²

In the eyes of many analysts, these ventures are a pretext for establishing footholds for the People's Liberation Army.¹³ The BRI has proven to be problematic in parts of Asia and Africa, partly due to the strategy of debt-trap diplomacy that allegedly underlies the BRI – countries accept unsustainable loans for infrastructure projects allowing China to seize the assets once they inevitably default.¹⁴ To date, however, deals with Pacific countries do not appear to contain any 'debt-for-equity' swap clauses.

Diplomatic and security drivers

From a diplomatic and security perspective, gaining a foothold in the South/South West Pacific is crucial for China to counteract what it perceives as US maritime encirclement with 'island chains', of which Micronesia's Freely Associated States (FAS) and US territories such as Guam are important components. It also helps to break the US's dominance in the region more broadly. Perhaps the West's greatest concern is that Chinese security pacts with Pacific countries clears the way for them to establish military bases, much as it has done on coral atolls and islands in the South China Sea over the last decade. China's plans to upgrade an airstrip in Kiribati has become one such diplomatic flashpoint.¹⁵ These concerns may or may not be well placed given that there are currently no permanent Chinese military installations in Pacific island countries.¹⁶

After a series of diplomatic overtures, including recognition of China's suzerainty over Taiwan in 2021, Solomon Islands signed a secretive security pact with China in 2022, the details of which were later leaked suggesting discontent within the administration in Honiara.¹⁷ The pact grants the Chinese navy the ability to conduct ship visits, have stopovers and carry out logistic replenishments.¹⁸ This was supplemented by a police cooperation agreement signed in 2023. Under this agreement, Chinese police officers based in the Melanesian country can be called upon to contain riots, such as those that broke out in Honiara's Chinatown in 2021.¹⁹ (Chinatown had been the focus for riots on numerous occasions before then).

Indeed, through its new or upgraded diplomatic relationships with the Pacific islands, China has sought to undermine Taiwan by putting pressure on Pacific leaders to cease their recognition of Taipei, as well as by securing new allies to vote with China at the United Nations. For example, in 2020, PNG supported China at the UN over the controversial Hong Kong Security Law.²⁰

Partial setbacks

China has been largely successful in building relationships in the Pacific partly by presenting itself as a dynamic partner that is able to complete projects in sectors such as infrastructure more quickly than traditional partners such as Australia and the US. But it has not all been plain sailing. For instance, the 2022 tour of Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi to eight Pacific islands, which aimed to secure an ambitious regional diplomatic, security and economic pact, was met with scepticism and ultimately failed. Notably, the pact would have included a major law enforcement component (with police training and forensic capabilities) and Chinese firms running internet networks in the region.²¹ While some bilateral agreements were reached, Fiji and Samoa voiced their concerns at being used as pawns in a geopolitical contest and rejected any approach that is contrary to the Blue Pacific concept, which emphasizes collective decision making among Pacific nations.²² This setback suggested a misunderstanding of the regional culture on the part of China, especially the need for early and deep engagement and the socialization of new ideas. In March 2023, the outgoing president of the FSM, David Panuelo, issued a powerful letter warning his country and the wider region about China engaging in 'political warfare' and 'grey-zone activities' as well as highlighting corrupt practices and the

risks for Micronesian sovereignty.²³ In Solomon Islands, Daniel Suidani, the former premier of Malaita, the country's most populous province, had been a long-standing critic of China's involvement in the area – refusing Chinese investments in Malaita and maintaining relations with Taiwan. His stance, however, appears to have cost him his seat: he was ousted in a vote of no confidence, allegedly involving the bribery of assembly members, in early 2023.²⁴

There have also been U-turns. Under the previous administration, Fiji had become close to Beijing but when Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka was elected in December 2022 things took a turn. Citing different 'democracy and justice systems', Rabuka decided to review a security agreement with China, which had included Chinese security personnel deployed to Fiji and training for Fijian law enforcement.²⁵ Rabuka also suspended the commissioner of police who had been seen as 'too close' to China. Fiji, in this sense, presents an interesting case. Despite drastic changes on the security front, China remains an important trading partner for the country under the BRI – a predicament shared by a number of Pacific countries.²⁶ Indeed, at the November 2023 Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Leaders' Summit, Rabuka further endorsed the BRI and conveyed Fiji's 'steadfast support' for China's Global Civilization Initiative.²⁷ Fiji is also looking to China for significant growth in its tourism industry and expects to reinstate direct flights during 2024.²⁸

Engagement between China and Pacific island countries on security matters is fairly new, and therefore a period of adjustments should be expected.

The United States

The US is integral to the region given its geographical location. COFA, as well as the presence of various US territories in the Pacific, are especially important in the context of current international competition. Although the FAS are sovereign states, the US has responsibility for ensuring their territorial integrity and provides economic and financial assistance. FAS citizens can travel and work visa-free in the US. At present, more than 94 000 live there. Crucially, under COFA, US armed forces can operate and establish military bases in the FAS and have operating rights over their waters and airspace.²⁹

The Trump and Biden administrations have both pushed for the renewal and reinvigoration of the COFA agreements to counter China's growing presence in the region (although there is some uncertainty as of February 2024 as COFA funding renewal is stalled).³⁰ In 2019, the State Department announced the Pacific Pledge, which comprised a new regional foreign-assistance programme amounting to US\$300 million in 2019 and 2020 for economic support, governance and security.³¹ Pacific efforts were extended with the Biden administration's Indo-Pacific Strategy in 2022 and the State Department's positioning to 'out-compete' China.³² These initiatives have been complemented by a string of high-level diplomatic visits to the Pacific, the convening of the US-Pacific Island Country Summits with regional leaders in Washington in 2022 and 2023, and the opening of new embassies in Kiribati, Solomon Islands, Tonga and soon Vanuatu. Notably, Kiribati and Solomon Islands had deepened their relationship with China and ended their recognition of Taiwan in 2019 – so it is hard not to see the opening of US missions there as part of an effort to counterbalance growing Chinese influence. At present, the RMI, Palau and Tuvalu are the only Pacific nations that maintain formal diplomatic relations with Taipei.³³ Nauru was the most recent country to suspend its ties with Taiwan and adopt the One-China Principle in January 2024.³⁴



President Joe Biden convenes the second US-Pacific Island Country Summit in Washington DC, September 2023.

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As part of its regional cooperation efforts, over the years the US also has established (and deepened) a number of so-called shiprider agreements. These allow Pacific law enforcement officers to embark on US naval and coast guard ships to pursue and search vessels suspected of illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing or, in some cases such as in Palau, allow US law enforcement to enforce regulations within a Pacific nation's exclusive economic zone on their behalf.³⁵ In May 2023, the US also signed a Defense Cooperation Agreement and an Agreement Concerning Counter Illicit Transnational Maritime Activity Operations with PNG.³⁶ PNG was named as a partner under the US Global Fragility Act in 2022 – one of nine priority countries in the world.³⁷ This is not surprising given its history of intense conflict as well as having the highest level of organized crime and violence in the region.³⁸ One of the most resource-rich countries in the Pacific, PNG has traditionally had strong ties with Australia, although it is getting closer to China, which now purchases over 50% of its produce.³⁹

Australia

Australia is a major donor and close partner to several Pacific countries, especially in Melanesia, as well as a key member of the PIF. Canberra's 'Step Up' policy in the Pacific, dating from 2016, encompasses a wide range of initiatives from infrastructure financing, underwater telecommunication cables and climate resilience to the delivery of training and analysis on regional security priorities.⁴⁰

Even prior to 'Step Up', Australia had enjoyed long-standing development and security agreements with the Pacific islands, including embedded law enforcement and security advisers in many cases.

Under the decades-long Pacific Maritime Security Programme, Australia has provided capacity-building, infrastructure and training aimed at increasing the regional and national-level maritime security of the Pacific island countries (and Timor-Leste). It is also arming PNG and Solomon Islands with Guardian-class patrol boats to combat existing and emerging security threats, including IUU fishing and transnational crime.⁴¹

Canberra was the main funder on the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI), which operated in Solomon Islands between 2003 and 2017 and focused on law and justice, policing and governance.⁴² Following the end of RAMSI, a bilateral security treaty between Australia and Solomon Islands was signed, allowing the Australian police, military and other personnel to rapidly deploy to the country.⁴³ In light of this close engagement with Honiara, the 2019 'switch' in the country's stance on Taiwan and the associated security deal between Solomon Islands and China were perceived as a significant blow in Canberra. Yet, this has not deterred further Australian engagement and support. In September 2023, at the request of Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare, Canberra agreed to extend its police presence under the Solomons International Assistance Force (SIAF) until June 2024. This was done in order to provide security for the 2023 Pacific Games and 2024 elections, and cooperation beyond June 2024 is expected.⁴⁴ The SIAF's original two-year mission, arising out of the November 2021 riots, also included the New Zealand, PNG and Fiji police forces.⁴⁵

The Australian Federal Police is deeply involved in a number of regional law enforcement initiatives. It funds the Pacific Transnational Crime Network, is a founding member of the Transnational Serious Organized Crime Pacific Taskforce, administers the Pacific Community for Law Enforcement Cooperation framework, and is heavily involved in the Pacific Police Development Program – Regional.⁴⁶

Beijing's overtures in Solomon Islands have exacerbated existing tensions between Australia and China and strengthened the perception of China as a hostile actor, in Canberra and beyond. Indeed, Fiji and PNG, despite their own relationships with China, have expressed concern that the security deal might destabilize the region.⁴⁷

Another example of China's influence on Australian-Pacific relations is Vanuatu. In 2022, the island country signed a bilateral security agreement with Australia covering a wide range of issues including law enforcement, cybersecurity, aviation safety, environmental security and disaster relief. In September 2023, the new prime minister, Sato Kilman, U-turned on the agreement (signed by his predecessor) and opposed its ratification in parliament. The security agreement was also not a priority for his successor, Charlot Salwai.⁴⁸ Vanuatu has since adopted a non-aligned position and, while the reversal was seen by some as driven by domestic politics, others have suggested that the primary consideration was that the agreement risked upsetting China.⁴⁹

New Zealand

While Australia 'stepped up', its ally New Zealand opted for a 'Pacific Reset' in 2018, which became 'Pacific Resilience' in 2021. These policies were built on long-standing ties with the region. In addition to political, economic and aid relations, New Zealand has very strong cultural ties with Pacific islands, especially in Polynesia; Auckland is considered to be the world's largest Polynesian city.⁵⁰ The importance of these cultural links is underscored by New Zealand's dedicated Ministry for Pacific People, which advises the government on issues affecting Pasifika communities, i.e. migrants from the Pacific region and their descendants living in New Zealand.⁵¹

The 'Reset' aimed to shift what was formerly a transactional relationship to one 'based on partnership, friendship and mutual benefit'.⁵² Cultural identity was certainly a driver but national security and the desire to contain China's expanding regional influence were also important factors in shaping Wellington's renewed engagement in, and increased funding to, the Pacific.⁵³ The Reset also translated into new efforts in Melanesia such as in Solomon Islands and Vanuatu that had also received greater Chinese attention.⁵⁴

Whereas the 'Reset' was perceived by many in geopolitical terms, the Pacific Resilience seeks to place Pacific nations at the centre of Wellington's engagement, emphasizing people-to-people relations.⁵⁵ Yet, geopolitical and national security concerns remain very much present. In 2022, then prime minister Jacinda Ardern was quick to react to Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi's tour of the Pacific in pursuit of a regional security pact, denying the need for any Chinese involvement: 'On anything related to security arrangements, we are very strongly of the view that we have, within the Pacific, the means and ability to respond to any security challenges that exist, and New Zealand is willing to do that.'⁵⁶

New Zealand has a few bilateral agreements with Pacific island countries, such as the Duavata Partnership, through which it cooperates with Fiji on policing, defence, border security, cyber security and intelligence to address maritime security and transnational crime.⁵⁷

China also featured in New Zealand's first national security strategy published in 2023, which acknowledged Wellington's strategic interest in continued engagement with Beijing (the two countries had signed a free trade agreement in 2008, which was enhanced in 2022).⁵⁸ At the same time, the strategy underscored the role of Chinese state-sponsored actors in undermining New Zealand's cyber security and highlighted 'China's ambition to link economic and security cooperation, create competing regional architectures and expand its influence with Pacific islands'.⁵⁹ New Zealand is far from unique in this regard and many countries, including the US and Australia, have to contend with the dilemma of pursuing trade relations with China while having to shield themselves from security breaches and political interference.

Under the conservative coalition government that was elected in November 2023, and despite Prime Minister Christopher Luxon's inclination towards improving ties with China for economic reasons, it is expected that New Zealand's foreign policy stance on the Pacific and China will remain consistent with the previous administration. This was signalled by the appointment of Winston Peters, one of the minds behind the Reset, as foreign affairs minister and deputy prime minister.⁶⁰

Other Western actors

The US, Australia and New Zealand are not alone among Western countries in re-thinking their position on the Pacific and wanting to increase their visibility and footprint in light of Chinese expansion. UK Foreign Secretary James Cleverly's trip to PNG and Solomon Islands in April 2023, coincided with a trip by Australian foreign minister Penny Wong to New Caledonia and Tuvalu,⁶¹ while French President Emmanuel Macron visited PNG, Vanuatu and New Caledonia just three months later.⁶² It is worth remembering that, through its overseas collectivities, France has a direct territorial as well as a diplomatic interest in the region.

Although the UK announced a 'tilt to the Indo-Pacific' in its 2021 Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy,⁶³ it could be argued that the foreign secretary made such

a high-profile visit to the region (the first in decades) due to more recent concerns over the deepening of Chinese influence.

Japan

It is not only Western countries that have diplomatic, economic and security interests in the region and share concerns over China's presence.

Japan is an important aid donor and trade partner for many Pacific countries. Tokyo's engagement in the region dates back to the 19th century, when the Micronesian islands presented a popular prospect for Japanese expansion southwards. This vision later materialized with the outbreak of World War I and Japan's occupation and administration of captured German territories in the Pacific under a League of Nations mandate. The Pacific islands were also key battlegrounds for Japan during World War II. Solomon Islands, and Guadalcanal in particular, where Japan had built an airfield, experienced some of the most savage violence in the Pacific theatre.⁶⁴ Nowadays, the crucial Japanese interests in the region are fisheries, especially tuna for the Japanese market,⁶⁵ and the issue of nuclear waste (which has been met with significant resistance from the islands and came back to the fore following Tokyo's release of Fukushima radioactive waste waters into the Pacific in 2023).⁶⁶

In the mid-1980s, the PIF and Japan embarked on strengthening their relations, with the Forum seeking support and assistance for regional shipping and telecommunications as well as the development of smaller PIF members.⁶⁷ Japan's commitment to the Pacific islands laid the groundwork for the establishment of the Pacific Alliance Leaders Meeting in 1997, a summit that brings together Japan, Pacific islands and Australia every three years and is structured around the pillars of self-determination, economic self-reliance, cooperation through aid and other funding and cooperation in international forums.⁶⁸

Such as other long-standing partners in the region, China's expansion has influenced Japan's position. This was manifested in the drafting of its 2016 strategic vision, the Free and Open Indo-Pacific. Tokyo's new foreign policy agenda placed greater emphasis on engagement with regional counterparts, support for multilateral frameworks and its alliance with the US – all factors that intensify its strategic competition with China.⁶⁹

Underwater cables are one such strategic issue. In 2019, Canberra had funded a telecommunication cable connecting Australia, Solomon Islands and PNG, effectively blocking Chinese firm Huawei from implementing its technology.⁷⁰ Following this, Japan partnered with Australia and the US in 2020–2021 to finance more undersea telecommunications cables for Kiribati, Micronesia, Nauru and Palau.

In 2021, Tokyo's ties to the islands were strengthened through the Pacific Bond Policy, and the next year it joined forces with Australia, New Zealand, the UK and the US to become one of five founding members of the Partners in the Blue Pacific (later joined by Canada, Germany and South Korea), to coordinate assistance for Pacific countries.⁷¹ Japan also opened new embassies in Kiribati and New Caledonia in 2023.

In terms of defence and security, Japan boosted its engagement with the first Japan–Pacific Islands Defense Dialogue in 2021, followed by joint military exercises between Pacific nations and Japan's Maritime Self-Defense Force and greater security assistance.⁷²

DONOR	COMMITTED US\$	SHARE	DONOR	SPENT US\$	SHARE
Australia	15.75bn	31%	Australia	15.04bn	40%
China	10.01bn	20%	China	3.46bn	9%
New Zealand	4.01bn	8%	Japan	3.45bn	9%
United States	3.8bn	7%	New Zealand	3.25bn	9%
Japan	3.78bn	7%	United States	2.93bn	8%
World Bank	3.19bn	6%	World Bank	1.83bn	5%
Asian Development Bank	2.58bn	5%	Asian Development Bank	1.82bn	5%
EU institutions	1.84bn	4%	EU institutions	1.71bn	4%
India	557.51m	1%	The Global Fund to Fight against AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria	517.95m	1%
The Global Fund to Fight against AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria	541.93m	1%	International Monetary Fund	485.05m	1%
Taiwan	507.46m	1%	Global Environment Facility	436.62m	1%
International Monetary Fund	484.65m	1%	Taiwan	383.06m	1%
Others (below 1%)			Others (below 1%)		
TOTAL	58.56bn		TOTAL	44.65bn	

FIGURE 2 Development aid to the Pacific region (2008–2021).

NOTE: These figures include development aid to Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, Nauru, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu.

SOURCE: Lowy Institute, Pacific Aid Map, <https://pacificaidmap.lowyinstitute.org/>



PACIFIC ORGANIZED CRIME IN THE 21ST CENTURY: DRIVERS AND EVOLUTION

Geopolitics and foreign influence are intertwined with organized crime. These links can be more or less obvious and vary over time, but it is undeniable that the attentions of certain foreign actors – including those with economic, political or security agendas in the region – have altered the patterns and pervasiveness of crime in the Pacific.

Compared to other regions of the world, the countries and territories that make up Micronesia, Melanesia and Polynesia have lower levels of criminality according to Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime research,⁷³ which, barring PNG, also equates to low levels of criminal violence.⁷⁴ However, regional resilience to crime is also relatively low due to limited resources and varying governmental capacity. As a result, the islands are vulnerable to criminal infiltration and exploitation, and find themselves increasingly criss-crossed by transnational illicit flows of goods, people and money.

Compounding these issues, Pacific law enforcement agencies are faced with capacity and resource shortages that undermine their ability to conduct investigations. This problem is particularly acute due to the remoteness of many islands and the sheer logistical costs required for police to reach them. This is a serious hindrance for police forces as well as for chronically under-resourced civil society groups looking to support communities outside of the main capitals.

According to the 2023 Global Organized Crime Index, the four most serious and organized forms of crime in the region are: the exploitation of natural resources, especially fish stock, minerals and timber (and to a lesser extent wildlife); financial crime, which has been increasingly enabled by technology; human trafficking, which often happens in parallel with the extractive industries and internet gambling; and drug trafficking, which has begun to find a domestic market, transforming the Pacific from purely a transit region to a consumer one.⁷⁵ In the case of the first two, private sector actors, more than criminals in the traditional sense, are the ones driving the illicit markets, often with the help of local entrepreneurs and enablers such as lawyers and accountants.

These criminal activities have profound impacts on local communities, ranging from the environmental destruction caused by extractive industries, and the human and sexual exploitation involved in those industries, to the public health implications of emerging drug consumption markets and the corruption arising from illicit proceeds weakening governance, democracy and public services. With criminal revenue flows compounding these structural weaknesses, Pacific islanders become even more vulnerable and susceptible to exploitation. Low investment in governance and the justice system makes officials more likely to turn a blind eye to criminality, while landowners sell access to land and maritime resources for limited economic benefit and without understanding the wider ramifications.

Notwithstanding the presence of domestic criminals, it is foreign actors that dominate and drive these illicit markets, and they are changing the criminal landscape of the region. Indeed, in recognition of this, PIF leaders have identified transnational crime – alongside human, environmental and cyber security – as one of the four key priorities under the 2018 Boe Declaration on Regional Security – a key document guiding and shaping the regional security environment.⁷⁶

This series of research papers will provide an overview and analysis of the different types of actors involved. As will become apparent, their activity and level of penetration within Pacific countries is linked directly to state actors in local administrations. In other words, an almost symbiotic relationship exists between corrupt/corruptible officials who enable foreign actors, and those same external actors who enable the corrupt machinery that now operates in some Pacific countries.

A series of independent and overlapping factors have influenced the trajectory of crime and criminal actors in the Pacific in recent decades. Though not exhaustive, below is a list of the key developments and their impact on criminality in the islands.

Globalization and connectivity

Globalization and increased connectivity have brought, as elsewhere in the world, advantages and vulnerabilities to the Pacific islands, which sit along the trade arteries linking Asia to Australia and New Zealand, as well as the Americas. These routes are used for the trade in both licit and illicit commodities, which has intensified in the late 20th and early 21st centuries.⁷⁷ Alongside narcotics, environmental products and human beings (often in connection with the extractive industries), have become the most trafficked commodities.

This increased connectivity has also boosted tourism. Starting in the early 2010s, several Pacific countries began to observe significant increases in holidaymaking (+20% in the FSM and +17% in Vanuatu between 2011 to 2013, according to the World Bank). These increases resulted in ever larger amounts of cocaine, heroin and methamphetamines being smuggled through tourist hubs both due to tourists' demand for narcotics and because pleasure boats were an effective way to transport drugs.⁷⁸ Palau also experienced a staggering 14 280% increase in Chinese visitors between 2008 (634) and 2015 (91 174),⁷⁹ in what is believed to have been part of a strategy to lure Palau into adopting the One China Policy, and renouncing its recognition of Taiwan.⁸⁰

Overall, the economic shifts towards the Asia-Pacific discussed in the first part of this brief have afforded the Pacific islands a more prominent role in the international arena. This has exposed the islands to greater economic opportunities as well as a number of associated risks.

China's economic, political and security expansion

As discussed in the first part of this brief, China's foreign policy and its pursuit of security and commercial interests have shaped many of the dynamics in the region (and beyond). Four factors have directly fuelled illicit markets.

First, Chinese vessels are responsible for the bulk of the world's IUU fishing.⁸¹ This is a long-standing practice that is typically carried out in parallel to legal fishing. China inaugurated its first distant-water fishing fleet as early as 1985, eager to compensate for the severe depletion of fish stocks in its own coastal waters.⁸² Since then, Chinese trawlers have been sent around the globe replacing American and Japanese fleets in the process as the key actors in industrial fishing in the Pacific.⁸³ China also has the world's largest aquaculture (fish farming) industry.⁸⁴

Second is the Chinese demand for timber. PNG and Solomon Islands are the main timber producers in the region. Most of this timber is harvested and exported illegally to Asian markets, of which China has the largest share.⁸⁵ Notably, Chinese involvement in PNG saw its share of PNG timber exports rise from 35% to 60% between 2001 and 2004.⁸⁶ As of 2018, this had reached approximately 87%.⁸⁷ Beijing also imports a similar share of Solomon Islands' timber (as per 2020 data).⁸⁸

Third is acquisition of minerals, oil and gas. These activities tend to be particularly opaque and illegal mining is flagged as a concern in Pacific countries.⁸⁹ As it is often the case, natural resource extraction is intertwined with politics. In Solomon Islands, the first initiative announced following the 2019 policy 'switch' was a pledge by the state-owned China Railway Group of US\$825 million to revive the Gold Ridge mine, which had previously been owned by local landowners.⁹⁰ While not necessarily illegal in themselves, the presence of mining operations, as well as logging camps, have created the conditions for other forms of criminality to thrive, particularly the sexual exploitation of local communities for the benefit of the foreign workers employed by mining and logging companies.⁹¹ Although they are the most prominent, Chinese companies are by no means the only ones operating in these sectors; Malaysian companies in particular, but also Indonesian, Filipino and Australian entities, are also important players.⁹²

Lastly, wider engagement with the BRI from the 2010s has paved the way for criminal infiltration. The BRI has proven particularly vulnerable to criminal exploitation including, but not limited to, Chinese



A fleet of Chinese fishing vessels at the dock in Colonia, Yap, Federated States of Micronesia. Chinese vessels are responsible for the bulk of the world's illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing. © Alamy Stock Photo

entrepreneurs setting up fraudulent businesses in BRI-partner countries and profiting from political connections back home (a phenomenon explored in detail in a subsequent paper).⁹³ This has created a situation in which individuals engaged in the licit and illicit economies alike are able to build networks of influence (and exert what the West sees as hostile foreign influence in some cases) in Pacific countries, which turn a blind eye to criminal activities carried out by Chinese businesses and criminals – as exemplified in the Palau case described in a subsequent paper in this series.

High demand for drugs in Australia and New Zealand

Australia and New Zealand are among the world's most lucrative consumer markets for drugs, and traditionally the Pacific islands have acted as transit points for narcotics coming to the antipodes from the Americas and Asia.⁹⁴ A surge in demand in the course of the 2000s, especially for methamphetamines and cocaine in the 2010s, led to the trade reaching record levels by 2020.⁹⁵ This has coincided with the establishment of consumer markets in some islands such as Tonga and Fiji.⁹⁶

Fiji reported possibly its largest drug bust in January 2024, when it recovered 3.5 tonnes of methamphetamines in Nadi. The incident, in which the drugs were thought to be in transit to Australia, allegedly with the help of officials and members of a pharmaceutical company, underscored the need to monitor the vulnerability of drug companies to criminal infiltration.⁹⁷

Australia and New Zealand's most recent wastewater reports identify methamphetamines as the dominant drug of choice, with their market value increasing year on year.⁹⁸ Whereas consumption is not as high as before the COVID-19 pandemic, it has recovered from the supply chain disruptions linked to the pandemic and remains worryingly high.⁹⁹

Chinese organized crime groups and Mexican cartels are key actors in this trade. Between the 1990s and 2010s, methamphetamines produced in southern China were commonly trafficked to



Fiji police seized over 3 tonnes of methamphetamines in January 2024, which were thought to be in transit to Australia.

© Fiji Police

Australia. A 2015 counter-narcotics agreement between Canberra and Beijing was able to put a dent in this trade; however, Chinese precursors (chemicals used in the manufacture of drugs) ended up in Myanmar and have since been used to produce methamphetamines, which are being exported by triads through the Pacific to Australia and New Zealand.¹⁰⁰

China is also the primary supplier of precursors to the Mexican cartels.¹⁰¹ Latin American cartels, especially from Mexico, dominate the cocaine supply chain to Australia and New Zealand due to their proximity to production. They have, however, also developed relationships with Asian syndicates as well as with Chinese-based chemical companies selling the precursors used for manufacturing fentanyl, a highly addictive synthetic opioid.¹⁰²

Influx of deportees

US, Australian and New Zealand deportation policies have often been criticized by Pacific leaders for undermining security and fuelling crime in the main destination countries of Samoa, Tonga and Fiji, but also in the FSM and the RMI. Deportations often involve Pacific nationals with criminal records (for crimes of varying severity) who had relocated to the US, Australia or New Zealand at a young age and had never lived on the islands as adults. Integration within island communities is therefore difficult and many criminal deportees re-offend, relying on the international connections they have built over the years, including with outlaw motorcycle gangs (OMCGs). This has a major influence on organized crime in the region, disrupting community life, and carries implications for young people who might look up to these individuals.¹⁰³

These deportation policies have been in place for decades, however the mid-2010s saw a tightening of legislation and an increase in the number of deportees. A key factor was Australia's introduction of Section 501 of the Migration Act in December 2014, which expanded ministerial powers to cancel visas and therefore added to the circumstances under which individuals can be removed from Australia.¹⁰⁴

Increased movement of outlaw motorcycle gangs

OMCGs have been the hallmark of Australia and New Zealand's underworld since the 1960s. They encompass both home-grown and US-exported gangs, some with criminal connections with groups in North America, Europe and Asia. These connections make possible their involvement in transnational drug trafficking, arms trafficking and financial crime, among other activities. Over time, OMCGs' makeup has evolved from a purely Caucasian membership to include those with Middle Eastern and Pacific backgrounds.¹⁰⁵

OMCGs are known for establishing island chapters, but since 2016 officials have noted a significant increase in the number of gang members travelling to Fiji and the Cook Islands in connection with drug deals.¹⁰⁶ This intensification in drug-related activities for motorcycle gangs is consistent with, and very much part of, the broad narcotics market trends described above.

Technological advances

Rapid technological advances are transforming the way business is conducted and opening up new opportunities for criminal exploitation. There has, for instance, been a proliferation in cybercrime, both of cyber-enabled and cyber-dependent criminal activities. The geographical remoteness of the

Pacific islands is no longer able to shield them from digital threats, a fact that was brought home by the 2022 ransomware attack on Vanuatu's government institutions.¹⁰⁷

Indeed, international cybercrime has spread into and is increasingly operating out of the Pacific. Notably, the explosion of cryptocurrencies following their inception in the late 2000s exposed Pacific countries to financial crimes in the form of crypto and blockchain-related schemes operating in the region. One of these, the US\$2.9 billion 'PlusToken' Ponzi scheme, resulted in the arrest of six Chinese nationals in Vanuatu in 2019.¹⁰⁸

Another major criminal trend involves human trafficking victims being held in cyber-scams centres, where they are forced to defraud victims abroad (usually in China). This practice started to emerge in the late 2010s and is now well documented in South East Asia. INTERPOL sees this modus operandi as taking on a global dimension.¹⁰⁹ In 2019, the discovery of over 200 Chinese nationals in a scam centre in Palau confirmed that the trend had reached the Pacific islands.¹¹⁰ Furthermore, Chinese criminal actors with triad connections and involved with cyber-scams in Cambodia and Laos were linked to these activities in Palau.¹¹¹ Local law enforcement has claimed that this cybercrime outfit had served as an entry point for Chinese triads in Palau.¹¹²



CONCLUSION

The Pacific region has become a crowded space and the subject of greater international attention: diplomatic, political, commercial and criminal. Undeniably, much of this has been driven by the unfolding competition between Asian and Western interests, which has had both a beneficial and corrosive effect on the islands and their inhabitants.

Many of the Pacific islanders who engaged with the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime shared the feeling that average citizens were stuck in the middle of these geopolitical machinations, lacking agency and suffering as a result, while some of their leaders have been skilful in playing international partners against each other. Whereas Australia, New Zealand, Japan and the US continue to be the biggest donors to the region, new players such as the European Union, Taiwan and China have emerged as key aid providers, adopting different approaches.¹¹³

This overcrowding also applies to the criminal space, both for those engaging in outright illicit activity and under the guise of legitimate business ventures. They fall under many categories, and include actors who have had a long-standing presence in the Pacific and those who are eager to exploit new opportunities, be they commercial or political.

The regional order is changing. This brief sets the scene for how this has influenced the growth of organized crime in the Pacific. It is against this backdrop that the different typologies of foreign actors discussed in the accompanying research reports shall be understood. And it is on these building blocks that our recommendations on how to tackle organized crime in an era of multipolarity and competition are built.



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