

## At Foreign Ministers' Meeting, China-Pacific Islands Relations Steam Ahead

While not groundbreaking, the meeting indicated steady progress towards China's goal of a "shared future" with Pacific Island countries – including using them as strategic outposts.

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By **Cleo Paskal**

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Solomon Islands' Minister of Foreign Affairs Peter Shanel Agovaka and delegation meets with the Chinese delegation led by Foreign Minister Wang Yi in Beijing, China, May 30, 2025.

Credit: [Ministry of Foreign Affairs & External Trade, Solomon Islands](#)

The China-Pacific Island Countries Foreign Ministers' Meeting took place in Xiamen, Fujian Province, China from May 28 to 29. All Pacific Island Countries (PICs) that don't recognize Taiwan were in attendance.

In a traditional Pacific Islands context, the highest-ranking attendee was the crown prince of the Kingdom of Tonga, who is also Tonga's foreign minister. This was a strong symbol to the region that relations with China are acceptable.

Also noteworthy was attendance by Cook Islands and Niue (with Niue represented by the prime minister). Both are part of the Realm of New Zealand.

In that context, one thing to watch across the region is how the definition of an independent country is being blurred. Niue's population is less than 2,000; its citizens hold New Zealand passports, and it uses the NZ dollar. Regardless, in 2023, the United States [recognized](#) it and the [Cook Islands](#) as independent countries (undoubtedly with New Zealand's approval). Neither are members of the United Nations.

As ties with China develop in fora such as these, there will be incentive for Beijing to support even

greater independence from Wellington, as already seen in the [Cook Islands](#).

From the joint statement, current leadership in both Cooks and Niue seem willing to support China in key areas, including that “China firmly opposes ‘Taiwan independence’ in all forms and commits to realizing national reunification, which has gained wide understanding and support at the meeting.”

This question of national or political aspirations and fuzzy sovereignty being exploited by China may also come into play in [Bougainville](#), which is pursuing independence from Papua New Guinea, after a referendum on the issue, and [New Caledonia](#), a French territory that has seen persistent unrest over Paris’ rule – and possibly Yap, Chuuk, Guam and elsewhere.

Apart from the expected statements about Taiwan, the [Joint Statement](#) declared:

“All parties... reaffirmed their commitment to deepening their comprehensive strategic partnership... and to building an even closer China-Pacific Island Countries community with a shared future.” The countries also agreed to “work with China to advance the building of a community with a shared future for mankind.”

Additionally, there are references to increasing “reserves of emergency supplies” (aka prepositioning), “police training,” and the potential for more “direct flights to Pacific Island Countries.”

That last one is important. Transport in the region is generally overpriced and inconvenient. For example, United Airlines' near monopoly in places like Federated States of Micronesia (FSM, a U.S. Freely Associated State), is throttling health care access, business development, educational opportunities and more.

Should China start offering direct flights to places like Woleai, Yap State, FSM – where a Chinese construction crew is currently rebuilding an old Imperial Japanese [runway](#) – it would be popular locally. It would also mean that flights could come into a highly strategic location without people and cargo going through checks in Guam or elsewhere.

The same is true across the region. On December 18, 2024, the first [direct flight](#) from China landed in Solomon Islands at the old Henderson Airfield, Guadalcanal. Ten days later, China and the Solomons signed visa waiver agreements, which, according China Daily, “paves the way for full visa-free access between the two countries.”

Given the ongoing open wound of the nuclear tests in places like Marshall Islands, the region is understandably sensitive to nuclear issues. The Joint Statement reiterated that China and the PICs “remain firmly committed to the international nuclear non-proliferation regime with the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons as the cornerstone and to the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty.”

China invariably uses this sort of statement primarily as narrative warfare directed against the West, especially on the topic of AUKUS. Meanwhile, according to the [Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists](#): “China is believed to have the fastest-growing nuclear arsenal among the nine nuclear-armed states; it is the only Party to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons that is significantly increasing its nuclear arsenal.”

So far there have been no strong Pacific Island countries statements of concern about China’s nuclear build-up.

The Joint Statement also noted that “[a]ll parties agreed to continue to promote synergy between high-quality Belt and Road cooperation and the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent.” The [2050 Strategy](#) is a Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) initiative and the deputy secretary general of the PIF attended the meeting “upon invitation on behalf of the secretary general.” This indicates a level of mutual comfort between China and the PIF.

A test of the depth of that relationship will be on display at the next Pacific Islands Forum Leaders Meeting (PIFLM) meeting in China-friendly Solomon Islands in September 2025, where China is [pushing](#) for Taiwan not to be welcome. This is putting Chinese-proxies in the PIF in the position of fronting for China by putting pressure on the

three PIF countries that recognize Taiwan: Marshall Islands, Palau, and Tuvalu.

At the PIFLM meeting in Tonga in 2024, members [passed](#) a statement that included a section reaffirming Taiwan's decades-long participation in the PIF. China complained, and the final communique deleted that section.

China has a track record of exerting influence in international organizations in ways that go [beyond](#) normal diplomacy. It seems to be looking to do the same through the PIF – all while making it look like it supports PIF goals through verbal nods in diplomatic documents. The September meeting in Solomons will show if it's China's or the PIF's priorities that take precedence.

Beyond the Joint Statement, the accompanying [“List of Measures](#) for China to Implement the Consensus of the Third China-Pacific Island Countries Foreign Ministers Meeting” mentions a range of specific activities that are much needed in the Pacific, including medical cooperation. China committed to “send 7 groups of 56 medical personnel to PICs within this year, expand exchange and cooperation on Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), continue sending additional TCM doctors to PICs, [and] carry out free medical treatment programs in PICs including the ‘Brightness Action’ and ‘Urology Action’ for cataract and urological patients within this year.”

The fact this sort of basic medical care is still urgently needed and is a “pull factor” for PICs

drawn to China is a reflection on the approach to the region of “traditional” partners. At a time when many hospitals in Solomon islands, for example, are so chronically short on medicine that essential surgeries are indefinitely postponed, Canberra is giving Solomons [AU\\$190 million](#) for “funding, training, and infrastructure to strengthen the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force.” Who can blame the Solomons’ health sector for welcoming China?

The list of measures also includes a pledge to implement “200 small and beautiful livelihood programs in PICs within this year,” addressing another perennial concern for Pacific Islanders.

Another one of the measures is China’s pledge to “speed up bilateral FTA negotiations with the relevant PICs.” FTAs can include loosening of customs and visa restrictions, speeding up China’s economic penetration, including via corruption, of the body politic of a country. This can dovetail with the setting up of Special Economic Zones (SEZ), something that is already happening. On May 26, Solomon Islands [passed](#) the Special Economic Zones Bill 2024 allowing for the establishment of SEZs within the country.

While not groundbreaking, the meeting documents indicate steady progress towards China’s goal of a “shared future” with Pacific Island Countries – including using them as strategic outposts. This is being accomplished through a deepening of mostly existing pathways

that are gaining more acceptance – in part through a lack of viable alternatives, as well as the unchecked persistence of strategic corruption.

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### TAGS