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Submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade inquiry into *Australia's response to the priorities of Pacific Island countries and the Pacific Region*.

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Summary

Rivalry between Australia and China in the South Pacific is harming the prosperity of the region. Establishing institutions for cooperation between Australian, Chinese and Pacific Island firms, governments, and universities can more efficiently address the region's major challenges as well as establish confidence and cooperation between all parties.

Introduction

Australia and its allies consider the increasing presence of the Chinese government and its firms in the South Pacific as a security risk. People and governments in the region hear this and understand that their peace and prosperity is a secondary concern to Australia and its allies.

The growing rivalry between Australia and China is leading to increased military spending, and to reactive development commitments in the South Pacific. This undermines the security and the prosperity of the Pacific Islands. It also wastes an important opportunity to coordinate and bring to bear the resources and skills of all development partners to maximise support to the Pacific Islands.

The alternative is greater cooperation between Australia and China to support the security and development ambitions of Pacific Island countries. This could yield great benefits for the region and help create important second track cooperation mechanisms to help build trust and confidence between Australia and China.

Security is about more than armed conflict

The security risks that most concern Pacific Island countries are in the areas of health and climate. Non-communicable diseases account for around 75 per cent of premature deaths in the region, and the region also has some of the highest rates of gender-based violence in the world. Climate change increasingly undermines human health, livelihoods, food security and

the very sovereignty of many countries, as expressed in the Boe Declaration on Regional Security.

Pacific island leaders use whatever resources they have at their disposal to tackle these existential challenges. They understand that China is no more a cause of these challenges than Australia or its allies.

Australia should not assume it has moral superiority in the region

Instead of increasing the rivalry, now is the time for Australia and China to pause and appreciate that neither enters the region with any obviously greater moral superiority or development capability.

People in the region see States, and their behaviours, over the long duration. They understand that China was never a colonial power in the South Pacific, it does not have military bases or offshore detention centres in the region, its historical and current per capita greenhouse gas emissions are far less than that of Australia, and it has never tested nuclear weapons in the region or mined islands like Banaba and Nauru to their bedrock. Pacific Island people remember these acts, even if Australia and its allies choose to forget.

The cutting of AusAid in 2013, offshore processing centres and nuclear submarines all imply that Australia is more interested in its own national security than the wellbeing of Pacific peoples. Yet Australia has made strong contributions to regional health, as demonstrated through its rapid and effective support for the region during COVID-19.

China, too, faces challenges in its rapid expansion in the Pacific islands. While it is perceived to have high capability in important areas of development like civil and coastal engineering, it has struggled to effectively communicate why it is growing its presence in the region. China's means of engagement with the region have also changed over time, creating perceptions of inconsistency, and concerns about transparency and the role of loans.

For most Pacific Island countries, China's growing presence in the South Pacific is much less a threat to their security and much more an opportunity to access new and additional resources to help address their key security challenges.

What if we cooperated instead?

If Australia and China both truly want to help Pacific Island countries tackle their key security challenges, they should work together to maximise the outcomes of their assistance to the region.

This means shared assessments of their respective resources and capabilities in the region, a forum for coordination of their financial and technical support for countries, and joint research programs on key scientific and technical challenges.

Should both parties be willing, cooperation between Australia and China on the shared challenge of supporting the security aspirations of Pacific Island countries would not only better serve those countries, it would also help neutralise the rising geopolitical tensions in the region and provide an important basis for cooperation and confidence building that can help reduce military spending and the risk of future armed conflict.

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