

This *In Brief* examines some of the zombie ideas around Chinese influence in the Pacific, which were reanimated by the November 2014 visit of President Xi Jinping to Fiji. I use the term ‘zombie ideas’ because of the persistence of these ideas, long after the creators of these myths have either left the field or repudiated their earlier positions. Before Xi’s visit, I outlined four myths about China in the Pacific that were likely to stalk the media ([Smith 2014](#)):

1. China has a strong diplomatic presence in the Pacific.
2. China’s development assistance is linked to resources.
3. China’s development assistance, trade and investment are used to support undemocratic regimes.
4. China’s leaders have closer ties to Pacific elites than Western leaders.

A piece from the leading wire service Bloomberg ([Shi 2014](#)) provides a useful framework for examining these persistent misconceptions about China’s presence in the Pacific.

The journalist found a bona fide China expert, Professor Kerry Brown, to support the first myth. He argued that ‘because of their strategic regional location, [China] is starting to regard [the Pacific Islands] as increasingly in its own backyard as it aspires to become a naval power.’ A naval power with a single aircraft carrier and no bases is on the aspiring side, but, to date, China has a small footprint in the South Pacific: few diplomats, no permanent military presence and relatively limited aid, trade and investment in comparison to other regions (Smith 2014). According to China’s second Aid White Paper, development assistance to the Pacific makes up 4.2 per cent of China’s total outlays ([Zhang 2014](#)), while outbound direct investment stock is less than two per cent, largely made up of a single project — the Ramu nickel mine in Papua New Guinea ([Smith et al. 2014](#)).

The article conflates China’s belligerent actions in the South China Sea with its behaviour in the South Pacific, assuming that the Chinese state behaves in the same manner everywhere around the globe. This misses the point that there is far less at stake in the South Pacific, so China’s representatives behave differently. This point is elegantly made in a recent piece that com-

pares the unilateral actions of Chinese state actors in the South China Sea with their multilateral approach to dispute resolution in the Arctic ([Taylor 2014](#)).

In the first sentence of the Bloomberg piece we are told that trade figures prove that China gave special treatment to the Bainimarama regime in the aftermath of the ‘putsch’ of 2006: ‘President Xi Jinping arrived in Fiji today to expand relations beyond trade that has quadrupled since then-army chief Frank Bainimarama staged a coup almost eight years ago’. This sounds like strong evidence that China manipulates trade flows to support undemocratic regimes, unless you realise that China’s trade with the Pacific as a whole — including the six nations that recognise Taiwan — also quadrupled over the past eight years (Smith et al. 2014). Trade with Fiji’s nearest neighbours, Tonga and Samoa, has increased sixfold and sevenfold respectively.

Even if one accepts the notion that the Chinese state wants to influence which regions its companies trade and invest in, the numbers don’t support the proposition that China is set on increasing its ‘economic clout’ in the South Pacific. In 2013, China’s trade with Pacific countries was worth US\$4.42 billion — considerably less than Australia’s trade with PNG, and accounting for 0.12 per cent of its total trade volume. By comparison, China’s trade with Africa stood at US\$210 billion — comfortably more than that continent’s trade with any of its former colonial powers. As China’s *Blue Book of Oceania* summarised, ‘China and the Pacific Islands have a low level of economic interdependence’ (Yu 2014).

The piece follows good journalistic practice by interviewing a couple of Chinese analysts, who let loose a few ‘made in China’ zombies. Shen Shishun, of the China Institute of International Studies, offers that small Pacific nations can’t ‘have their cake and eat it too’, implying that these nations are losing out materially by recognising Taiwan. The disastrous slide of Taiwan’s ruling Nationalist Party (KMT) in the November local elections may mean that diplomatic competition between China and Taiwan in the South Pacific could be back on the agenda as soon as 2016, when the leader of the

pro-independence Democratic People's Party may become the new president of Taiwan.

However, South Pacific nations that recognise Taiwan, from Solomon Islands and Kiribati to Nauru and Tuvalu, do have their cake and eat it. Chinese trade and investment with these nations is booming. According to researchers from Sun Yat-Sen University's Center for Oceanian Studies, China trades more with the countries in the region that recognise Taiwan than with those that recognise the People's Republic, enjoying high trade volumes with the Marshall Islands and Solomon Islands (Yu 2014, 15).

The aim of this *In Brief* is not to condemn the article, but to alert policy-makers to the danger of accepting assertions about China's influence in the South Pacific, simply because they are repeated in the mainstream media. Nor do I wish to argue that Chinese officials are above a bit of mischief.

The Fiji visit was Xi Jinping's first tour as president, but although the Bloomberg article describes it as his first tour of the South Pacific, he visited Fiji in February 2009 when he was vice-president — a visit the Chinese side initially tried to conceal from Australia and New Zealand. Subsequent Chinese media reports referred to the two-day visit as a 'transit stopover', while according it more ink than the average official state visit, right down to 'China highly appreciates Fiji's adherence to the one-China policy' (Xinhua 2009).

Given that the Bloomberg article tries to create an impression of menace, the author's ignorance of this incident is unfortunate, as it is one instance where Chinese state actors clearly were up to a bit of mischief in the South Pacific. Wikileaks cables reveal just how perturbed Australia's officials were at the time, with diplomat Robert Fergusson briefing a US official that 'the PRC would have known that the Xi visit and its results would be contrary to the hard-won Pacific [Islands] Forum consensus [to isolate the Bainimarama regime]' (Morgan 2011).

Ultimately, sanctions and isolation proved ineffective and speeches by Xi and Bainimarama were laced with references to true friendship in adversity. Chinese media reports of Xi inviting Pacific leaders to get on board China's 'development express train' (Xinhua 2014) alarmed some sections of Australia's media.

However, it would be a mistake to confuse the rhetoric of close ties with Pacific elites with the reality. Whatever impression some Pacific leaders may wish to convey to Australia and New Zealand's leaders, the region's trade, investment and military ties with China suggest the South Pacific is a long way from becoming China's backyard any time soon.

## Author Notes

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