

**Book review: Graeme Smith, Terence Wesley-Smith (eds): The China Alternative - Changing Regional Order in the Pacific Islands; Canberra: Australian National University Press 2021, 978-1-7604-6417-2**

Seib, Roland

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Rezension / review

**Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:**

Seib, R. (2022). Book review: Graeme Smith, Terence Wesley-Smith (eds): The China Alternative - Changing Regional Order in the Pacific Islands; Canberra: Australian National University Press 2021, 978-1-7604-6417-2. *International Quarterly for Asian Studies (IQAS)*, 53(2), 307-311. <https://doi.org/10.11588/iqas.2022.2.19767>

**Nutzungsbedingungen:**

Dieser Text wird unter einer CC BY-NC-ND Lizenz (Namensnennung-Nicht-kommerziell-Keine Bearbeitung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu den CC-Lizenzen finden Sie hier:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/deed.de>

**Terms of use:**

This document is made available under a CC BY-NC-ND Licence (Attribution-Non Commercial-NoDerivatives). For more information see:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0>

Yifei Li and Judith Shapiro could also have sharpened their argument by examining alternative explanations. Contradictions between state behaviour and mixed results might emerge out of conflicts between different actors within and outside of the complex party-state system, rather than from the coherent coercion imposed by a single state. This hypothesis is worth testing because the central government does not always have control over local officials to enforce policies fully. The inconsistencies of China's dealings with international environmental issues could also result from conflicts and negotiations between various actors in the government system and international actors.

In summary, this book provides a convincing analysis of the coercive practices of China's state-led environmentalism, with rich empirical evidence. The authors' critical analysis has both practical and theoretical relevance. With a clear structure and accessible language, it provides an excellent overview of China's environmental protection approach.

*Dongping Wang*

GRAEME SMITH / TERENCE WESLEY-SMITH (EDS), *The China Alternative. Changing Regional Order in the Pacific Islands*. (Pacific Series). Canberra: Australian National University Press, 2021. 504 pages, \$70.00 (print). ISBN 978-1-7604-6416-5 (print), 978-1-7604-6417-2 (online). The book is available to download for free at [press.anu.edu.au](http://press.anu.edu.au).

The present volume discusses the rising influence of China in the Pacific. Although previously competition with Taiwan for diplomatic recognition ("chequebook diplomacy") prompted foreign policy initiatives from both Asian countries, over the past ten years the People's Republic of China (PRC) has pulled ahead by a substantial margin. These initiatives have made China the most important trading partner of Australia, New Zealand and other Pacific Island states and thus the second largest trading partner in the region. After Australia, China is the most important donor country in bilateral development cooperation in the Pacific region. This cooperation is being broadened through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which, so far, New Zealand and 10 of 14 sovereign Pacific Island countries in the region have joined. In addition to the Solomon Islands and Kiribati, which switched diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to China in 2019, these countries are Fiji (diplomatic relations since 1975), Samoa (1976), Papua New Guinea (1976), Vanuatu (1982), the Federated States of Micronesia (1989), Cook Islands (1997), Tonga (1998) and Niue (2007). The Marshall Islands, Nauru, Palau and Tuvalu number among the 15 mostly small countries which currently still recognise Taiwan.

This edited volume is the result of a workshop and symposium in February 2019 on the campus of the University of the South Pacific in the Vanuatu capital of Port Vila. Seventeen researchers from Fiji, Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Australia, New Zealand, the United States, China and Timor-Leste explore this rise of China in 16 chapters and an introductory chapter, and the book also includes the opening remarks of the then Foreign Minister of Vanuatu, Ralph Regenvanu, and those of the general secretary of the most important organisation in the region, the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), Dame Meg Taylor. The contributors analyse the most important factors in changing relations and reflect on the economic, political, diplomatic and strategic implications for dominance in the region on this transformation of Pacific Island states.

The presence of China poses a challenge to the dominance of Western powers and their allies, who have set the agenda in the Pacific since the end of the Second World War. Until today, the region has been characterised by (post-)colonial power structures. In the South Pacific these are Australia, which sees itself as a regional stabilising power representing the United States and views the Melanesian countries as its backyard or “patch”; New Zealand, which as a Pacific country has close relations with the Polynesian island states (the independent Cook Islands and Niue are freely associated with Wellington and, unlike the other countries in Polynesia, not members of the UN); and France, which still control the colonies of New Caledonia, French Polynesia (both PIF members) and Wallis and Futuna. Even now, the EU member state still sees itself as a Pacific power with control over an exclusive economic zone covering 7 million square kilometres and regulates China’s access to the three countries.

In the North Pacific (Micronesia) the predominance of the United States is ubiquitous for primarily strategic reasons. In that region, the Federated States of Micronesia, the Republic of the Marshall Islands and Palau are part of the Compact of Free Association, which gives the US exclusive control of an area covering 5.59 million square kilometres. To this can be added the unincorporated US territory of Guam, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands and American Samoa in the South Pacific. The citizens of these nations can move freely between the United States and their home countries. Hawaii and Easter Island belong to the US and Chile respectively. New international actors such as Indonesia, Russia, India and Israel are also involved, as well as old partners such as Great Britain (with its only remaining colony, the Pitcairn Islands).

In her opening remarks, Dame Meg Taylor clearly states that the Pacific Island states regard the presence of China in the region as a positive development because it gives PIF countries access to markets, technology, financing and infrastructure. This presence offers opportunities but also poses significant risks. Dame Meg rejects the binary view that the Pacific has to choose between China, and thus a one-China policy, and traditional partners. The concept of the “Blue Pacific” or “Blue Pacific Continent” is deliberately emphasised as dis-

tinct from the dominant narrative of a marginalized region and is viewed by state leaders as an alternative empowering development path and the most important driver of collective action in the context of Pacific regionalism. The Boe Declaration of the PIF meeting in 2018, which states that “climate change remains the single greatest threat to the livelihoods, security and wellbeing of the peoples of the Pacific” (ix) – is the principal element of efforts by Pacific Island state leaders to implement the “Blue Pacific” concept and stands in stark contrast to the environmental and security policy of PIF member country Australia as well as that of the previous Trump administration.

The introduction by the editors and the first two chapters explore the return of great power competition, the mapping of the “Blue Pacific” in a changing regional order as well as the danger of a new Cold War. It is obvious that China’s claim of sovereignty over a large portion of the South China Sea and the announced reunification of Taiwan with the “mother country” have heralded a new phase of uncertainty and possible destabilisation in the region, although, unlike the countries of East and Southeast Asia, the Pacific is not currently situated at the front line of the conflict. To this can be added security-policy initiatives and the military arms buildup, which is unfolding especially in the form of US bases in the North Pacific and in Australia, which are covered by security treaties (ANZUS, “Quad”, “Five Eyes”).

The arguments presented in chapters three to six show how Australia, New Zealand, the United States and France are faced with differing kinds of issues about China and have changed their policy in response to China’s activity. Discussion here focuses in particular on investment programmes worth billions of dollars for developing the infrastructure of Pacific Island countries (Australia’s “Pacific Step-up”, New Zealand’s “Pacific Reset”, Washington’s “Pacific Pledge” and Great Britain’s “Pacific Uplift”). It is above all Canberra that views Beijing as an ultimate strategic threat at the national, regional and global level. Beijing’s debt-trap diplomacy and debt-for-equity lever, for example with Sri Lanka, are criticised and said to be decimating Canberra’s influence as the anchor of South Pacific stability. In addition, there is also aggressive diplomacy (in contrast to courting the Pacific heads of state) as well as massive economic and domestic political infiltration by China (in a milder form also in New Zealand). In Australia alone, economic damage caused each year by Beijing’s punitive actions in response to bans on Huawei equipment (Australia excludes the Chinese company from the country’s 5G roll-out) and COVID-19 demands (Canberra’s call for an independent investigation into the origins of the virus) runs into the billions annually. But Palau and the Marshall Islands are also exposed to economic sanctions because of their close relations with Taiwan.

Chapters seven to twelve present the views of a Chinese scholar (according to whom Beijing does not give the Pacific a high priority) and discuss China’s development aid and the inclusion of the Pacific in the Belt and Road Initiative

(in 2015 the BRI was extended to the Pacific as the “21st Century Maritime Silk Road Initiative”), the influence of China in the Solomon Islands and Fiji, Taiwan’s misunderstood efforts to draw attention to its shared Austronesian identity with the Pacific, and the advantages and disadvantages of the BRI in Papua New Guinea. The last three chapters deal with the Chinese communities (“old” integrated diaspora versus “new” migrants) and the resulting conflicts in Vanuatu, Papua New Guinea and Timor-Leste, which is increasingly identifying with the Pacific region.

In summary, it can be said that the Pacific as the sole domain of the West is a thing of the past. China has used the disinterest and declining development aid of longstanding partners to establish itself in the Pacific. However, there is no discernible grand strategy that specifically focuses on Beijing’s hegemony, nor are there any indications of a preference for the Chinese development model. This also shows that China’s soft power qualities are limited in the region. The granting of concessional credits is unconditional (“no strings attached”). This increases the lack of transparency and worsens mismanagement, corruption and bad governance. There is also concern that Beijing’s low-interest loans are subject to the laws of China and are interpreted in accordance with these. In addition, Chinese companies import their own workforce, concepts and resources for projects. In the Pacific, a debt trap can be ruled out as China’s strategy. Although several countries are endangered by debt, only Tonga has a high level of overindebtedness to China. As far as Chinese corporate investments are concerned – around USD 5 billion has been invested so far, mainly in mining, construction, real estate and retail – violations of landowners’ rights, late payments of royalties and major environmental damage are the norm, something which is also the case with Western companies.

It is also clear that Chinese involvement can have a massive influence on the domestic policies of the Pacific states. The difference in the structure of the relationships is the competence and sovereignty of governments. This can be seen, for example, in Fiji and the Solomon Islands. Fiji has used the sanctions of Western partners – in response to the abolition of its constitution in 2009 following the coup d’état of 2006 – to proactively approach China as a stopgap and to shape bilateral relations according to its own ideas. With the constitution of 2014 and the end of the sanctions, Suva opened up again to its Western partners and benefited from development aid. Fiji has now emerged as the most important regional player with a broad international impact. The Solomon Islands, on the other hand, are completely different. With fragile and corrupt state institutions, the country is barely able to manage relationships effectively. As with Papua New Guinea, financial support from China could come at the cost of a further opening up of the raw materials sector to Chinese corporations and could further undermine weak governance.

The 47th session of the Human Rights Council in Geneva in June 2021 showed that China's international relations with the Pacific and the rest of the world are developing extremely dynamically. While Canada, on behalf of 44 countries including the Pacific states of Palau and Nauru, expressed concern about China's human rights violations in Xinjiang, Tibet and Hong Kong, 68 developing countries led by Belarus, including the Pacific nations of Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Kiribati and Tonga, sided with Beijing and rejected interference in China's internal affairs. The anthology presents an excellent analysis of China's relations with the Pacific, the multidimensionality of which cannot be adequately depicted here, even in part. This volume has considerable importance given the relatively limited scientific scholarship thus far on this topic.

*Roland Seib*

KEYUAN ZOU (ED.), *The Belt and Road Initiative and the Law of the Sea*. (Maritime Cooperation in East Asia 9). Boston: Brill, 2020. XVIII, 220 pages, €125.00. ISBN 978-9-0044-2204-9 (hc)

This edited volume presents a collection of writings that aims to assess the maritime implications of the nascent, China-led Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which was officially announced by China's President Xi Jinping in 2013, within the framework of the international law of the sea. The "Road" portion of the BRI somewhat confusingly refers to the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road (MSR), which is ocean based. The MSR is envisioned as using China's coastal ports to link China's economy with Europe and with the South Pacific Ocean via maritime passageways including the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean (p. 1). The book is organised into five parts, which consider the BRI in relation to: the use of the oceans; sea lanes of communication and navigational safety; maritime energy and sea ports; maritime law enforcement and cooperation; and access of land-locked states to the sea. Taken together, the overall thesis of this timely contribution involves assessing and understanding the economic and legal challenges that exist in the maritime domain with regards to fulfilling the lofty economic and development promises of the BRI in the near and long term.

While Chapter 1 provides a concise overview of each contribution in the volume, Chapter 2 discusses the BRI in relation to maritime economic cooperation in East Asia, specifically from a South Korean perspective. Authors Seokwoo Lee and Hee Eun Lee assess the BRI in terms of its potential to enhance regional connectivity in East Asia and clearly consider its growth to be a model for potential South Korean-led regional development. Nevertheless, the BRI is viewed