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Ontological Security in China–Pacific Islands Countries (PICs) Geopolitics

Sophia Sui¹ and Lei Yu^{2,*}

¹ Deakin University, Victoria 3217, Australia

² Shandong University, Weihai 1264209, China

* Correspondence: lei.yu@bfsu.edu.cn

Abstract: The sufferings of “Old China” of being bullied and invaded by the colonial and imperialist powers in the “Chinese century of humiliation” and the experiences of the PRC of being militarily encircled and diplomatically isolated by the United States and its allies have constituted the basis of China’s ontological security. The article aims to explore China-PICs relationship from the perspectives of ontological security of China. It finds that this conception of ontological security results in China’s view of the existing hierarchical order dominated by the US-headed West as a threat to its security and prompts it to work together with other developing states to create a new international order that China deems more reasonable and fairer. The article concludes that China’s ontological security has posed a critical challenge to the hierarchical order in the South Pacific and the existing hierarchical relationship between the PICs and the former colonial powers that have to date kept the hierarchical relationship as the basis for their ontological security.

Keywords: ontological security; China–PICs relations; “equal” partnership; hierarchical order; new world order

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1. Introduction

The political leaderships of the PICs and China announced at the third China-PICs Economic Development and Cooperation Forum held in Samoa in 2019 to upgrade ties to “a strategic partnership” [1]. Some scholars of international relations (IR) and policy analysts conceive the partnership as a signal for both sides to intensify economic, and, by extension, political and security collaboration amidst a regional backdrop of intensified geopolitical competition between the emerging and established powers [2] (p. 861) [3]. The partnership is designed as such to be within the ambit of “South-South cooperation”¹, at the heart of which lies the intent to achieve a “win-win” outcome of economic prosperity and mutually political backing in the region and beyond. Notably, the partnership can be said to be built on a great asymmetry arising from their divergence in the size of population, territory, economics, etc. Nevertheless, an analysis on the “asymmetry” finds that it is essentially different from that in the relationships between the PICs and the former colonial powers (e.g., the United States and Australia). As the latter has to date been based on the coloniality of power and characterized by the hierarchical relationships of domination [4] (p. 67) [5] (p. 9).

The research objective of the paper is to explore China-PICs partnership from the perspectives of Chinese ontological security that narrates China as an “equal” partner of the PICs, particularly in terms of geopolitics. It argues that China’s experiences in the “century of humiliation” that started from the first “Opium War” in 1839 to the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and the collective memory of the Chinese people of their country being bullied and invaded by colonial and imperialist powers constitute the basis of China’s ontological security. It finds that China’s conception of ontological security drives the Chinese foreign policy elites to conceive the existing hierarchical global order as a threat, and the Chinese foreign policy makers to create an “equal” rather than hierarchical relationship with the PICs in regional geopolitics. It concludes that China’s ontological security has important implications for and poses a critical challenge to the hierarchical relationship between the PICs and the former colonial powers, which has to date remained the basis for the latter’s ontological security. This article adopts the concept of ontological security and the method of narrative analysis to analyze the evolving Chinese strategy towards the PICs.

2. The Concept of Ontological

The concept of ontological security can be understood as where an actor has a consistent sense of “self” by performing actions to underwrite its notion of “who they are” [6] (p. 3). Self-concepts and the “self” of states are constituted and maintained through a narrative that gives life to routinized foreign policy actions [7] (p. 107). Ontological security “provides leverage for understanding how fears and anxieties have psycho-socio-political

effects that shape political movements, [and] policy debates ... ” [8] (p. 250). Ontological insecurity can be understood as an interruption in the security of being found in feelings of fear, anxiety, crisis and threat to wellbeing [9] (p. 543). Building on social psychology and sociology, some theoreticians identify two sources of ontological insecurity: interaction with the international society, or a state’s sense of self that helps to process the relevant elements of the environment [10] (p. 11). The concept of ontological security in IR argues that states would like to create a self-identity to provide them with a stable sense of self and categories of behavior and guide them through a complex world [11] (p. 741) [12] (p. 109). A state’s identity, therefore, plays a significant role in affecting how the state perceives the world and its actions in the world.

China’s state identity had been primarily created by the country’s historical experiences and the memory of being bullied and invaded by colonial and imperialist powers over the “century of humiliation” that started from the first Opium War/Chinese-British Trade War in 1839-1842 to the founding of the PRC in 1949 [13] (p. 9) [14] (p. 477). The narratives of the “century of humiliation” have played a decisive role in the formation of China’s state identity as a “revolutionary” and “challenger” of the hierarchical global order dominated by the West [15] (p. 132) [16] (p. 1047). In the same vein, the founders of the PRC and the present Chinese foreign policy elites alike view the hierarchical global order as a result of colonialism, imperialism, and hegemonism, posing a critical threat to the security, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of the developing states in general and China in particular.

The ideological values and worldviews of the founders of the PRC (e.g. Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping) and the current Chinese foreign policy makers (e.g. Xi Jinping) alike are profoundly shaped by the “Chinese century of humiliation”. The bullying imposed by the imperialist powers on the “Old China” before 1949 spurred Mao Zedong and other Chinese intellectuals, such as professor Chen Duxiu & professor Li Dazhao at Peking University, to “shatter the old world” dominated by the imperialist powers and to “create a new one” by accepting Marxist theory and leading to the creation of the Chinese Communist Party [17] (p. 1439). Mao Zedong later recalled the bullying and humiliation suffered by the “Old China” at the Paris Conference in 1919 as the main incentive for him to accept Marxist theory and devote his life to “shatter the old world” and create a “new one” [18] (p. 6).

The above narratives of the Chinese revolution could be commonly found in the mainstream literature on Chinese history and politics. It provides insight into how the “Chinese century of humiliation”, among others, shaped the ideological values and worldviews of the founders of the PRC and why they aspired to create a “new world” with an equal and fairer order by “shattering the old one” with a hierarchical and unfair order through revolution (“armed struggle”) instead of evolution (peaceful reform) [17] (p. 1440). Mao’s “new China” (the PRC) had indeed risen in the ashes of

a fourteen-year war against the invasion of the Japanese imperialists (1931–1945) followed by a five-year civil war against the Nationalist regime (the Republic of China), which was militarily supported by the “American imperialists”. Their self-identity as “revolutionaries” and their worldviews prompt the founders of the PRC to be committed to “shattering the old world” dominated by the imperialist powers and “creating a new one” for the “oppressed peoples” in the “third world”, who were living under “oppression” and “exploitation” by the imperialists and their domestic proxies [17] (p. 1440) [19] (p. 7).

The identity of “new China”, on the one hand, served Mao Zedong’s strategy of mobilizing all the resources inside and outside China to frustrate any military intervention launched by imperialist powers. On the other hand, it placed the PRC on a moral high ground in the international community as a “revolutionary”, challenging the hierarchical global order dominated by the colonial and imperialist powers. Based on their personal experiences of the Chinese “century of humiliation”, the founders of the PRC anchored a deep suspicion of the hierarchical world order and conceived it as designed as such by the US-headed imperialist powers to “repress world revolutions” and “exploit” the nations later categorized as the “third world” [20] (p. 60). The founders of the PRC thereby called for the “oppressed nations and peoples across the world” to revolutionize the global system and order by “creating a new world”. This is why the founders of the PRC defined “new China” as “a champion of revolutionary in the world politics” and identified the mission “to promote the world’s revolution as one of their major tasks” [21] (p. 107) [22] (p. 207).

The PRC had not only acted as a challenger to the post-war hierarchical order and a revolutionary “mentor” of the “third world”, but had also been committed to reshaping the post-War order and security arrangements, particularly in East and Southeast Asia where it had the capability of power projection. It is noteworthy that the military involvement of the PRC in the Korean War² and the Vietnam War could hardly be viewed as driven solely by the PRC’s national interest but as much as, if not more than, by its state identity, as discussed in the previous paragraphs. These two wars changed the post-war geopolitical landscape in East Asia, exemplifying the significant role of China’s state identity in challenging and altering the regional order. This argument is supported by the mainstream Chinese IR literature, where the Chinese scholars expound China’s involvement in the Korean and Vietnam wars as a result of various factors, such as the Communist ideology upheld by the founders of the PRC, the state identity of the PRC, and China’s security and geopolitical interests [23] (p. 17) [24] (p. 67).

Notably, an agreement has been reached among the Chinese IR academics that what Mao Zedong had done during his ruling of China testified to his capability of “shattering the old world” as a revolutionary. However, some Chinese politicians and academics doubt Mao’s capability of “building a new world” and blame him for the deaths of millions of Chinese

people as a result of his disastrous policies, such as the “Great Leap” and the “Cultural Revolution” [25] (p. 112) [26] (p. 66). Different from Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping displayed his aspiration for and capability of “building a new world” by proposing the creation of a “more reasonable and fairer” order with China as a “pole” within it as the United States is [27] (p. 96). In so doing, Deng Xiaoping altered the state identity of China from the “champion of the world’s revolution” to a “revisionist” of the existing world order (or in the official Chinese term, “a responsible power”) [21] (p. 107) [28] (p. 7) [29] (p. 23).

The disintegration of the former Soviet Union, the once formidable superpower, and the domino effect fall of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe shocked Deng Xiaoping and the Chinese foreign policy makers. It is noteworthy that Deng Xiaoping [27] (p. 380) theorized the Soviet demise as the corollary of its economic incapability of financing its “imperial over-expansion”, rather than the triumph of American-style democracy over the Soviet communism and the universalization of liberal democracy as the final form of human government [30] (p. 9). It is in this context that Deng Xiaoping proposed, among others, two strategies to mastermind China’s drive for a “more reasonable and fairer” global order with China as a “pole” within it [22] (p. 239) [31] (p. 56). The first one is to ‘prioritize economic growth and modernization in the next one hundred years’, which Deng identified as the basis underlying China’s power and particularly its military capabilities [27] (p. 370). The Chinese political leadership has thereafter stuck to Deng’s dictum that ‘to sustain economic growth remains their paramount task’ and been committed to economic growth and modernization.

The second strategy that Deng Xiaoping proposed was to promote “South-South cooperation” that he forecast would substantially boost China’s economic growth and augment its political and diplomatic prowess and influence [27] (p. 56). It is in this context that China expedites its pace in extending engagement with the other developing states, including the PICs, and has intensified its economic and, by extension, political relationships with them on an equal footing. There is no denying that China embraces economic and geopolitical motivations behind its strategy of “South-South cooperation”. The former relates to advancing China’s economic growth and modernization, while the latter ensures China’s rise as a “pole” at the systemic (global) level alongside its augmented wealth [22] (p. 207).

Moreover, Deng’s South-South cooperation encompassed various purposes. First, it mitigated China’s economic pressure resulting from offering assistance to the “Third World” to woo their diplomatic support in the international arena. Second, it helped China access the resources, markets and investment opportunities of the developing countries to sustain China’s economic growth. Third, it helped China intensify economic and, by extension, political cooperation with other developing countries. Deng’s proposal of South-South cooperation has altered the paradigm of China’s economic interactions with other developing countries. Economic

cooperation and trade on an equal footing have thereafter been a new “shared interest” between China and other developing countries alongside anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism.

Chinese foreign policy elites have long perceived the developing countries in Africa, Latin America and other parts of Asia as the “basis” underpinning China’s political and diplomatic clout and influence [16] (p. 1047) [32] (p. 32). Waldron’s remarks exemplify the close relations between China and the developing countries when he observes, “Beijing has the possibility of winning almost fifty friends in Africa ... with a collection of such friends, China can create her own sphere of influence, secure her own resources, and develop military and political leverage” [33] (p. 16). China views the developing countries as its ‘political allies’ in the world arena, particularly when it faces pressure from the western states on such issues as its human rights record. This sheds light on why China defines its relationships with the developing countries as ‘the bedrock of its IR’. Deng Xiaoping re-proposed the “non-interference” strategy that China co-proposed with India and Myanmar (Burma) in the early 1950s as the norms governing Chinese relations with the developing states [27] (p. 281). In so doing, China sent a message to the developing countries that it treats them as equal partners and no longer exports revolution, or provides military assistance to overseas communist insurgents as it did in Mao Zedong’s era [21] (p. 107). Instead, China appealed for “south-south cooperation” regardless of the divergence in ideologies and political institutions among the developing states [16] (p. 1047) [34] (p. 7).

In Xi Jinping (2013-)’s time, China has intensified its partnership with the developing countries alongside its rise as the second largest economy at the current price (around 17.7 billion in 2021) [35]. The Chinese government designed a blueprint for the country’s economic and social progress over the decade from 2013–2025, which the Chinese political leaders and strategists consider as vital for China’s rise at the systemic (global) level [36] (p. 239). To this end, Xi Jinping proposed the creation of “the community of shared future”³ to intensify China’s cooperation with the developing countries as “equal” partners for common development and shared prosperity, and more importantly, a new international order deemed by them as “more reasonable and fairer”. In this sense, the narrative of China in the PICs as an “equal” partner is a significant element in Chinese foreign policy in view of the role that ontological security plays in shaping China’s foreign policy towards the PICs.

China has long felt ontologically insecure in the US-dominated hierarchical global order, in which the PRC has been militarily threatened, diplomatically isolated and strategically contained [22] (p. 239) [37] (p. 137). China’s sense of insecurity has exacerbated since the demise of the former Soviet Union when the Chinese foreign policy makers (e.g., Deng Xiaoping) forecast their country to be the next target of western containment and “color revolution”. Deng Xiaoping [27] (p. 344) expressed his anxiety in explicit terms: “The Western states are staging a Third World War ... they

want to bring about the peaceful evolution of socialist countries towards capitalism.” In Deng’s view, the objectives of western “peaceful evolution (color revolution)” were aimed to bring the communist rule of China to an end. The ongoing America-China trade war as well as the US “pivot to Asia”, the “free navigation operations” in the South China Sea and the newly created “AUKUS” (Australia-United Kingdom-US) alliance have extremely reinforced China’s sense of insecurity. In the viewpoints of Chinese foreign policy elites, the above moves are seen as specifically taken by the United States to maintain the status-quo of its-dominated hierarchical order and contain the rise of China [36] (p. 327) [38].

Vis-à-vis the growing hegemonic competition, China has accelerated its pace in the promotion of the “democratization of IR” and a new international order [39] (p. 55) [36] (p. 325), in which all countries are equal members of the international community whether they are big or small, strong or weak, rich or poor [40]. In so doing, China is aimed to achieve, among others, its ontological security by working together with other developing countries to create a less hierarchical, if not an equal, world order. In the above analysis, we focus on how ontological security is understood in the context of China’s IR and what it means when it is threatened.

3. China’s Ontological Security in China-PIC Geopolitics

A number of developing countries were unwilling to grant China diplomatic recognition in the early Cold War era for fear of China’s export of revolution and for Taiwan’s competition and US objection [41] (p. 730). It was not until the late 1975 when Fiji and Samoa took the lead in the PICs in granting China a diplomatic recognition. Hu Yaobang, General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, was the first top political leader to visit the PICs (Samoa, Fiji and Papua New Guinea, PNG) in 1985. Hu drew their relations closer by highlighting their countries as the victims of western colonization and the hierarchical global order and by pledging an equal treatment with the PICs through the pursuit of the “non-interference” strategy (the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence) [42] (p. 243) [43] (p. 56). Hu’s pledge of ‘non-interference’ and an equal partnership was appreciated by PICs’ political leaderships as opposed to the policy adopted by the former colonial powers who seek to maintain their hierarchical relations with the PICs based on the power of coloniality [44] (p. 193). China concluded the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone (SPNFZ) Treaty, also known as the Treaty of Rarotonga, in 1987 and pledged not to conduct any nuclear test in the zone to woo the PICs by showing respect for the PICs’ security concerns as an “equal” partner [45]. At the invitation of the PICs, China joined the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) two years later as a dialogue partner and it has thereafter attended the forum annually by dispatching a high-ranking envoy.

China showed little interest in the PICs before the 21st century, though it had become a player in the regional geopolitical game. This was reflected

by the few exchanges of high-ranking visits (if any) and by the meagre volume of two-way trade of \$168 million at the end of 1999 [46]. The reasons can be explained in two ways. Firstly, China cautioned against giving an offence to the former colonial powers in the region, especially the United States, by intruding into their “sphere of influence”, or “backyards” when China was in need of their markets, investment and technology [16] (p. 1049) [47] (p. 54). Secondly, China had been desperately in need of overseas markets, capitals and resources throughout the 1990s when it was in the process of industrialization and modernization. This is why China had been vigorously involved in resource-abundant Africa, Southeast Asia and Latin America by pursuing the “going out strategy”, known as “China goes global”. This strategy was specifically designed to tap the vast pool of overseas resources and raw materials in support of Chinese industry and manufacturing.

China has intensified its involvement in and political cooperation with PICs since the 21st century out of strategic, diplomatic and economic motivations. The Bush administration’s conceptualization of China in early 2001 as a strategic competitor [48] (p. 47), together with its unilateralism and belligerence reflected in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, dramatically increased the Chinese sense of insecurity. This sense was further deepened by the creation in the same year of a trilateral security mechanism among the United States, Australia and Japan, America’s two military “anchors” in the Pacific. The security mechanism reveals US attempts to create ‘an American-led multinational security framework designed first and foremost to guard against China’ [49] (p. 740). China was obviously concerned with the mechanism and the rapidly growing US-China geopolitical competition. The People’s Daily, the official newspaper of the Chinese Communist Party, warned the United States not to destabilize the Asia-Pacific region and Australia not to serve as ‘a cat’s paw’ for the United States [50].

Against the backdrop of the great power competition, China has thereafter redoubled its efforts in expanding its involvement in regional geopolitics and intensifying its comprehensive cooperation (strategic partnership) with the PICs. Most noticeably, China initiated the creation of the China-Pacific Island Countries Economic Development and Cooperation Forum and Wen Jiabao, Premier of China (2003–2013), addressed the first ministerial conference held in Fiji in 2006. Wen explained China’s intensification of the partnership with the PICs as a strategic, rather than a makeshift policy as it contributed to peace and prosperity in the region and served ‘the fundamental interests of each side’ [51] (p. 349) [52] (p. 54). Wen urged both sides to coordinate policies on major international issues, support each other in the international community and strive for a more reasonable and fairer order. The creation of the Forum is viewed by Chinese IR scholars as a landmark in China-PICs ties, signaling that their cooperation would expand from economic to political and strategic realms [36] [53] (p. 35).

Xi Jinping has attached much more strategic significance to China-PICs relations than his predecessors did as reflected by his three visits to the region and by the unprecedented enhancement of economic and political cooperation with PICs. Xi reassured the PICs in his visit to Fiji in 2009 that China respects their independence and sovereignty and treats them as equal members of the international community. During his visit in 2014, Xi and his counterparts from eight PICs, namely, Fiji, PNG, Tonga, Samoa, Vanuatu, Micronesia, Cook Islands and Niue, announced the creation of “a strategic partnership of mutual respect and common development” [54,55]. In Xi (2013)’s viewpoints, this partnership is aimed to seek common development, shared prosperity and regional peace by intensifying their economic integration, political trust and security cooperation. Xi not only granted zero-tariff on PICs’ exports to China, more economic assistance to PICs and 2000 scholarships for PICs’ students to study in China, but also provided economic and technological assistance for tangible projects in fishery, mining and other areas.

Xi touted the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to his counterparts from PICs at the 2018 APEC summit in Port Moresby, PNG. The BRI was first proposed by Xi in 2013 at the height of President Obama’s strategy of “pivot to Asia” that was widely conceived by the Chinese foreign policy makers and IR academics as designed to contain China despite Washington’s denial [56] (p. 287) [57] (p. 97). In this context, it is not surprising that the BRI is aimed partially to open up a “new battlefield” of geopolitics in other parts of the world than the Asia-Pacific region, such as the South Pacific, to counter US containment of China [58] [59] (p. 26). The BRI is an umbrella initiative, involving a massive amount of infrastructure construction and investment projects that enable it to alter the development environment and geopolitical landscape [60] [61] (p. 43). The BRI in the PICs contains a number of geopolitical elements as observed by IR scholars and analysts within and without China [62] (p. 285) [63] (p. 107).

Together with the BRI, China concluded in 2019 the Program of Action on Economic Development and Cooperation that suggests jointly promoting the BRI projects and cooperation in such fields as trade, investment, agriculture, fishery and infrastructure construction. To further intensify China’s partnership with PICs, the much-delayed Third Ministerial Conference of China-PICs Forum was convened in Samoa in late 2019 under Xi Jinping’s ‘personal promotion’. Vice Premier Hu Chunhua, the once speculated heir to Xi, addressed the conference, stressing the need to deepen their strategic coordination in international affairs, push forward the BRI and cement their strategic partnership [3,64]. Obviously, the Chinese foreign policy makers expect China-PICs Forum to advance not only their economic cooperation and trade but also their political and strategic partnership [65] (p. 71) [66] (p. 97).

Apart from the PIF, China has shown a strong interest in and support of the newly established regional organization - the Pacific Islands Development Forum (PIDF) that was founded in 2013 and is based in Suva,

Fiji. The PICs identify the PIDF as the “only platform” meeting the needs of legal and political regionalization process in the Pacific [67]. The PIDF signals the PICs’ efforts to forge ahead with regional solidarity to reshape their relationship with the former colonial powers from a hierarchical one to an equal one. It also indicates that the PICs expect to harness political power and will into a strong voice to counter western hegemony regionally and project their global role [3]. The PIDF has enhanced the PICs’ collective bargaining power and its ability to engage with the former colonial powers and challenge the regional hierarchical order based on the coloniality of power [68] (p. 77). In this context, the PIDF is widely perceived as a challenge to the PIF dominated by Australia and New Zealand, and welcomed by the PICs as a hope for “engaging with the Pacific”, free from the politics of the PIF. To this end, the PIDF specifically designates China, Russia and Turkey as partners, aiming to balance the former colonial powers in the region. The PIDF, together with China-PICs Economic Development and Cooperation Forum has thereafter served as significant platforms to intensify their partnership, reshape regional geopolitics and challenge the existing hierarchical order in the region.

Parallel to their efforts in challenging and re-shaping their relationships with the former colonial powers, the PICs embrace the willingness to actively woo the emerging powers for their investment, to broaden options for economic growth, and to meet the domestic demands for stronger infrastructure, jobs and well-being [69] (p. 631). While the former colonial powers remain the PICs’ main trade and investment partners, the competition has rapidly grown since the late 2000s when China emerged as the second largest economy and provided alternatives to the roles of the former colonial powers. This sheds light on why China is increasingly viewed as a strategic rival to the former colonial powers, challenging the historical self-identity as PICs’ “natural partners” after the PICs’ independence.

Statistics released by Chinese Ministry of Commerce (2019) show that the two-way trade between China and PICs skyrocketed to \$8.2 billion in 2018, up from \$880 million in 2005, and China’s FDI in PICs reached \$4.5 billion, up from 900 million in 2013. Radically different from the former colonial powers, China rejects their “hypocritical” practice by linking economic aid and investment to the PICs’ human rights records and good governance [70] (p. 177) [71] (p. 57). The Chinese model of economic development (or the Beijing Consensus) offers an alternative to other developing countries and encourages them to shift away from the western model (or the Washington Consensus), threatening the hierarchical order in the South Pacific and other parts of the developing world.

4. A Critical Appraisal

The discussion to this point reveals the multiple motivations behind China’s creation of an “equal” strategic partnership with the PICs to reap not only economic and diplomatic interests, but also geopolitical interests by

re-shaping the regionally hierarchical order that China views as a threat to its ontological security. By creating an equal partnership, China aspires to gain entry to the PICs' markets, resources, and investment opportunities, which, together with those in other parts of the world may help sustain China's economic growth. Deng Xiaoping identified economic growth as the basis underlying China's power, including its military capabilities and the legitimacy of the communist rule of China [27] (p. 380). Deng's doctrine provides insight into the Chinese strategy of prioritizing economic growth since the late 1970s [72] (p. 51). Moreover, China has to find investment destinations across the world, including the PICs, given its enormous foreign exchange reserves of over \$3 trillion [73].

Chinese foreign policy elites view their country's equal partnership with the PICs as paving the way for its BRI in the region and their strategic collaboration, both of which may substantially alter the geopolitical landscape and the hierarchical order in the region [3] [66] (p. 93). The data released by China's Ministry of Commerce reveal that the Chinese investment in infrastructure projects has become the lion's share of China's investment in the PICs [66] (p. 97). Recently, a deal of \$800 million has been signed by the Solomon Islands and China to build infrastructure projects at the Gold Ridge mines on Guadalcanal [74]. Sam Group, a Chinese company, concluded a deal to transform Tulagi, an island in the Solomon Islands, into an economic development zone [75]. Denied notwithstanding, this project and others reflect that China's intensified involvement in the region contains much more calculations than economic interest.

China's attempts to create an "equal" partnership with the PICs serve as a way to win the latter's political and diplomatic backing in relations to Taiwan's competition and US containment. The South Pacific has become an arena for China and Taiwan to compete for diplomatic recognition and the newest battleground in China-US geopolitics [5] (p. 13). The Solomon Islands and Kiribati switched their diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to China Mainland in 2019 out of economic, political and strategic calculations. The Chinese foreign policy makers view Taiwan as an "inseparable" part of China and accuse the United States of abetting Taiwan's split to contain China's rise [76]. China is in need of the political support of the developing states to block the US-headed West from interfering with its domestic affairs, such as Hong Kong, Xinjiang, Tibet, human rights, etc., and to create a new international order that it deems "more reasonable and fairer" [77] (p. 124) [78].

The "equal" partnership provides China with a convenient avenue to intensify its security cooperation with and military presence in the PICs. China has sent many more vessels and warships to the South Pacific since the late 2000s for information collection and military training and has aspired to develop military bases in the PICs [79]. The increased presence of Chinese warships and the planned naval bases in the South Pacific reveal China's ambition to overcome the US military encirclement by breaking through the so-called "three island chains"⁴ and, more importantly, to

re-shape the hierarchical order in the Pacific. It is in the context of America-China geopolitics and hegemonic competition that the Chinese foreign policy makers attach much more importance to the PICs than ever before [3] [80] (p. 67). Chinese foreign policy elites hold fast to the belief that the ongoing trade wars, US military operations in the South China Sea and the newly created "AUKUS" are designed to contain [81] (p. 238) [82] (p. 37). They predict worsening China-America ties and suggest to 'give up the illusion of American partnership and face squarely the inevitable strategic competition' [83].

China's aspiration to create an equal partnership has resonated with the PICs where the local political elites view the intensified partnership as a diplomatic instrument to help 'shrug off sanctions' imposed on them by the former colonial powers [84] (p. 21). In a 'thinly veiled swipe at Australia and New Zealand', Frank Bainimarama, Prime Minister of Fiji, embraces China as "a true friend" and the partnership as 'a great leverage over traditional powers'. Manasseh Sogavare, Prime Minister of Solomon Islands, hails China's intensified presence and the partnership as a counterweight to the former colonial powers and a significant step towards terminating their hegemony in the region [85]. Obviously, the PICs are taking advantage of the Chinese alternative to reshape their relations with the former colonial powers and regional hierarchical order [69] (p. 654) [86] (p. 322).

Notwithstanding its increased presence and influence, the Chinese foreign policy makers and IR academics have to acknowledge that their country's might in the region remains a far cry from that of the United States, let alone the combined might of the former colonial powers [3] [66] (p. 93). It is no denying that the United States has incomparable "hard" and "soft power", particularly unmatched capabilities of military projection in the region and beyond [87] (p. 16). It is safe to conclude that there is a long way for China to go before it, and the PICs can substantially reshape the regional geopolitics and hierarchical order given the combined prowess and influence of the former colonial powers in the region. China's intensified partnership with and its unprecedented involvement in the PICs have triggered concerns particularly in the United States and Australia, known as the "Sheriff" and "Deputy Sheriff" of the region.

As noted, some foreign policy analysts in the United States have issued a warning call and have labeled China "a rival" in the US backyards [88] (p. 7); others claim that "there is a U.S. - Chinese cold war, and American policymakers need an updated version of Kennan's containment" [89]. Regional watchers and analysts surmise the US "Indo-Pacific" Strategy and Australia's South Pacific "Step Up" as a jointed response to China's expanding presence and influence in the region [36] [90] (p. 47). In this context, the PICs are most likely to proceed cautiously in their relations with both the emerging and traditional players, though they may welcome the former's increasing presence and aspire to reduce their dependence on the latter.

5. Conclusions

This article argues that the collective memory of the Chinese people of the “century of humiliation” constitutes the basis of the country’s ontological security. The PRC’s experiences of being militarily encircled and diplomatically isolated by the United States and its allies have profoundly reinforced China’s sense of insecurity. The historical memory and the PRC’s experiences taken together contribute to China’s view of the existing hierarchical order dominated by the US-headed West as a threat to its security and to its unrelenting efforts to create a new international order that it deems more reasonable and fairer. It is noteworthy that an important point emerges from the discussions in the paper, that is, the continuity of China’s foreign policy practice about the creation of a strategic partnership with the PICs to coordinate and intensify their efforts in re-shaping the regional geopolitics and the hierarchical order. It is in this context that China’s ontological security has posed a critical challenge to the hierarchical relationship between the PICs and the former colonial powers, which remains the basis for the latter’s ontological security.

Notes:

1. The “South-South Cooperation” is a process whereby two or more developing countries pursue their individual and/or shared national capacity development objectives through exchanges of knowledge, skills, resources, and technical know-how, and through regional and interregional collective actions, including partnerships with involvement from governments, regional organizations, civil society, academia, and the private sector, for their individual and/or mutual benefit within and across regions [91].
2. The mainstream perceptions of Chinese academics on China’s involvement in the Korean War are radically different from those of the West. Many Chinese scholars characterize China’s involvement in the war as inevitable, driven not solely by Communist ideology, but also by geopolitical interests, territorial security and economic rehabilitation from its long-term wars. In their eyes, after the US-headed UN forces crossed the 38th parallel into North Korea and quickly pushed forward towards the Chinese border, Mao Zedong was left with only one option: to roll back the UN forces to the 38th parallel by sending troops to North Korea [92,93].
3. Some Chinese IR scholars believe that “the community of common destiny” is a new strategy proposed by Xi Jinping, reflecting China’s concept of its relations particularly with the developing countries, including African countries: to seek common development and shared prosperity through economic regional cooperation and interdependence [94] [95].
4. The three island chains theory provides a lens through which to analyse PICs’ relevance to China’s military strategy. Countries in the northern Pacific – including Guam and the Northern Mariana Islands – sit along the second island chain. This 1950s United States - created theory has been an important driver of PLA Navy development. Successive PLA Navy leaders

have developed different strategies to break through these island chains, including “coastal defence” (1950–85), “offshore waters defence” (1985–2008) and a “combination of offshore waters defence and open-seas protection” (since 2008). The island chains have also appeared in PLA reports, a testimony to their military relevance [96].

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