

**THE “GREAT GAME” IN THE
SOUTH PACIFIC**

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Executive Summary

1. Considered a strategic backwater since the violent clashes of the Pacific War, the “South Pacific” (or sometimes “Oceania”) has re-captured international spotlight as regional powers jockey for influence in what has widely been dubbed a “Great Game”.
2. The Pacific Island Countries (PICs) cover a vast expanse of widely dispersed archipelagos in the southern Pacific Ocean. Despite the highly diverse constituent states, the PICs broadly face sustained challenges to political and economic stability and climate change, including rising sea levels and natural disasters.
3. The stakes in the emerging southern Pacific Great Game among resident and external powers in the region are found at the nexus of geostrategy, geopolitics and geoeconomics. The contest is ultimately over which “side” holds a favourable regional balance of power or can claim a “sphere of influence”.
4. The most powerful players in this Great Game are China and the United States, with Australia also in the forefront, due to its proximate location and outsized engagement in the region. Other significant players include New Zealand, Japan, France and Taiwan; new entrants may emerge, such as South Korea, India and Indonesia.
5. The game is played out across many intersecting levels as (i) a sub-regional part of a wider contest for supremacy in the Indo-Pacific between China and the United States; (ii) between China and Australia, and China and Japan for local regional influence; and (iii) between Taipei and Beijing for diplomatic allegiance, with New Zealand and France also seeking to advance their own national agendas.
6. Within the PICs, there is another Great Game between individual states which seek to play off external parties against one another to reap the maximum benefit and leverage outside influence for domestic purposes or against their neighbours. This gambit involves risks as well as opportunities for the PICs.

7. The Solomon Islands have become a recent focal point of this great game. The country's Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare has controversially shifted diplomatic recognition from Taipei to Beijing and announced a shadowy "Security Agreement" with China, speculatively paving the way for a People's Liberation Army base in the future, despite vehement denials by the prime minister.
8. For Australia, this has major ramifications for its national defence doctrine as the Pacific Islands form a strategic barrier ("the Melanesian arc") through which any hostile power will have to penetrate to threaten the Australian mainland.
9. Australia has long viewed itself, and been viewed by others, as a regional stabiliser due to its deep connections, including its hefty Official Development Assistance contributions and repeated military/police interventions. The concern is China seeking to displace Australia as the region's primary security provider.
10. Washington's recent unveiling of a comprehensive re-engagement plan, after decades of benign neglect, including major economic and other forms of assistance as an "addendum" to its Indo-Pacific Strategy, is likely to raise the stakes of the game still further.