China’s *Blue Book of Oceania (2016–2017)*: Perspectives from China

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People’s Republic of China (PRC) scholars perceive China’s *Blue Book of Oceania*, edited annually by the Center for Oceania Studies at Sun Yat-Sen University and published with China’s Social Sciences Academic Press, as a leading source on Australia, New Zealand and Pacific studies. It is also a standard reference book for China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This In Brief reviews the contributions in the latest *Blue Book* (2016–17) to highlight key issues in China’s relations with Oceania as identified and discussed by leading Chinese and other regional scholars.

**China–Australia relations**

Professor Yu Changsen, Executive Director of the Center for Oceania Studies, contends that the Turnbull government is seeking to balance Australia’s relations with the United States and China, hedging its bets on China by separating political and economic relations. Sophia Sui from the University of South Australia argues that due to a divergence between Australia and China on security issues, Australia has tightened its control over PRC overseas direct investment. Wang Yi from Griffith University cites the 2017 Whittlam oration delivered by Stephen FitzGerald, Australia’s first ambassador to the PRC, as an example of Australian politicians’ strategic thinking on managing relations with China. According to Dr Wang, FitzGerald proposed that Australia increase its engagement with China and promote Mandarin language education as a way of managing the relationship with Beijing. In his view, Australia needs to strengthen Beijing’s trust in order to enable it to have more voice and influence on China.

**China–Pacific engagement**

Wang Zuocheng from China’s Liaocheng University lists new progress in China’s relations with a number of Pacific island countries (PICs) in 2016–17. In April 2016, Fijian Foreign Minister Ratu Inoke Kubaubola visited China and voiced Fiji’s support of China’s position on the South China Sea. In line with China’s Belt and Road strategy, the Shenzhen municipal government has actively sought to promote its exports to the Pacific region. In October 2016, it signed an agreement with the China National Building Materials Group (CNBM), a Chinese state-owned enterprise, which will enable the former to utilise CNBM’s market network in Papua New Guinea by allocating an exhibition area for Guangdong/Shenzhen products in CNBM’s flagship wholesale and retail centre BNBM Home in Port Moresby. In June 2016, the Guangdong provincial government organised an exhibition tour of Guangdong premium products in New Zealand, Fiji and Tonga, which was attended by over 60 exporters from Guangdong.

Chinese private enterprises have shown growing interest in the region. Singyes Solar, an independent power producer from Zhuhai city in Guangdong, invested US$4.4 million in the construction of a 2 MW *solar farm* in Nuku’alofa in December 2016. The project was completed in September 2017 and started to supply electricity to Tonga Power Ltd based on a 25-year power purchase agreement. In terms of people-to-people exchanges, China and Tonga signed an *agreement on mutual visa exemption* for ordinary passport holders for a stay of up to 30 days, which has the potential to increase the number of Chinese tourists in Tonga.

**Chinese aid in the Pacific**

Chinese aid is another hot topic in the *Blue Book*. In May 2016, China committed US$17.6 million in grants to implement the Tonga High School Sports Complex for the 2019 Pacific Games, which is China’s largest single grant aid project in the country. In the same month, the Guangdong Provincial Foreign Affairs Office hosted the second training session for 24 youth leaders from the Pacific. In October 2016, it hosted the third training session for 29 public servants from all eight Pacific countries which have diplomatic relations with China (except Niue). Beijing also started to provide short-term training courses specialised for Fiji. Training on the integration of commercial cultures was held in Beijing between June and July 2016, and attended by 13 Fijian government officials and...
10 Fijian staff working for China Rail First Group, Vatukoula Gold Mines and China’s technical assistance project on Juncao in Fiji (growing mushrooms out of chopped grass).

In the Blue Book, Professor Wang Xuedong, Deputy Director of the Center for Oceania Studies, and Yu Fuquan review Chinese medical aid to the Pacific. Beijing has tasked Guangdong to lead provincial cooperation with PICs. Since 2012, the Guangdong provincial government has organised short-term medical tours to all eight of China's Pacific partner countries except Niue, which is credited by Professor Wang as a significant component of Guangdong–PICs cooperation (Yu et al. 2017:238). In addition, China has stationed medical teams to carry out medical procedures and work in specialist areas in Vanuatu (since 1985), Sāmoa (since 1986), Papua New Guinea (since 2002), Tonga (since 2010) and the Federated States of Micronesia (2009–11, 2015–17). The Australia–China trilateral aid project on malaria control in PNG, the first of its kind between Australia and China in the region, is also highlighted in the discussion.

The authors have identified weaknesses in Chinese medical aid to the Pacific, which include: 1) given Chinese medical aid is project-oriented and adopts a bottom-up approach, there is a large gap in China’s ability to support Pacific governments to strengthen their overall leadership and governance capacity in the health sector; 2) China’s role in assisting PICs to set up their health databases is extremely limited; 3) China and PICs lack cooperation on traditional Chinese medicine, which is still denied access to the region, and Pacific islanders have to date only accepted acupuncture and therapeutic massage; and 4) private Chinese subcontractors have undermined the reputation of Chinese medical practitioners. Some of these subcontractors are disqualified to deliver medical service overseas as they have both poor medical proficiency and English language skills, and they are concurrently engaged in other paid work, which is prohibited by PRC aid regulations.

The United Nations Development Programme in China contributed a chapter to the Blue Book, which includes a translation of a policy report drafted by Denghua Zhang from the Australian National University (Zhang 2017). The report elaborates on potential challenges, opportunities and policy implications on China–PICs cooperation under the 2030 UN sustainable development agenda. It focuses on PNG, Fiji and Sāmoa as target countries and the four sectors of infrastructure, health, climate change and renewable energy. Some of the recommendations include, supporting priority areas in each PIC’s national development plan and localising China’s country strategy in the context of individual PICs; allowing flexibility and identifying innovative approaches to deliver development cooperation; strengthening the statistical capacity of PICs; and identifying opportunities for more trilateral aid cooperation between China, traditional donors and PICs.

Belt and Road and the Pacific

David Morris, Director of the Pacific Trade & Investment Office in China representing the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, assesses Asia’s growing impact on the Pacific in the Blue Book as follows: Most of the current discussions on China–Pacific relations are restricted to bilateral government-to-government engagement and give scant attention to the region as a whole. If China attempts to adopt a one-size-fits-all approach in implementing infrastructure and interconnection projects with PICs under the Belt and Road, it will not be an easy process (see also Zhang 2017:30). It is also unlikely that China will be able to successfully conduct these types of projects in small island states. Although Chinese financial institutes are familiar with large projects worth over US$1 billion, such projects are far beyond most PICs’ financial means and capacity to manage, which makes it difficult for the China Development Bank to identify appropriate projects in the region. PICs need to raise well-prepared proposals for projects that suit the region, and seek innovative and multiple financing.

To sum up, the above discussions reveal some issues deemed important by the Center for Oceania Studies and provide a window into Chinese perspectives and attitudes to developments in the region.

Author notes

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Endnotes

1. During the visit, the Chinese government pledged to continue providing aid to Fiji and support Fiji’s aspiration to play a greater role in international and regional affairs.

2. The promotion of traditional Chinese medicine overseas is both a component of health cooperation between China and other countries and a way to increase China’s soft power.

References

