

RCAS Commentary

China-Cook Islands Deal Raises New Zealand's Concern

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About RCAS

香港亞洲研究中心| The Hong Kong Research Center for Asian Studies (RCAS) is a nonprofit research organization focusing on Asian affairs. It is a newly established institution founded in February 2022 by Dr. Nian Peng in Haikou and subsequently moved to Hong Kong in September 2023. We currently have an international research team with nearly 100 resident/nonresident researchers from China and other countries.

RCAS aims to become a leading research institute and think tank on Asian affairs in the Indo-Pacific region. To date, RCAS has conducted research programs on maritime disputes in the South China Sea (SCS), China's relations with the Indo-Pacific states, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), terrorism/counterterrorism in the Afg-Pak region, and so on. It is committed to promoting maritime cooperation, regional integration, and regional peace in the Indo-Pacific region at large.

RCAS has published nearly ten books in Chinese and English and more than 20 papers in SSCI/SCOPUS/CSSCI-indexed journals. Recent English publications include *Populism, Nationalism and South China Sea Dispute: Chinese and Southeast Asian Perspectives* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2022); *Pakistan's Foreign Policy: Contemporary Developments and Dynamics* (London: Routledge, 2022); *Crossing the Himalayas: Buddhist Ties, Regional Integration and Great-Power Rivalry* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2021); *The Reshaping of China-Southeast Asia Relations in Light of the COVID-19 Pandemic* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2021); *Territorial Disputes, The Role of Leaders and The Impact of Quad: A Triangular Explanation of China-India Border Escalations* (2023); *Managing the South China Sea Dispute: Multilateral and Bilateral Approaches* (2022); *China-Pakistan Cooperation on Afghanistan: Assessing Key Interests and Implementing Strategies* (2022); *Hedging Against the Dragon: Myanmar's Tangled Relations with China since 1988* (2021); and *China-Pakistan Conventional Arms Trade: An Appraisal of Supplier's and Recipient's Motives* (2020).

RCAS has also published hundreds of articles, and its researchers have been interviewed in various local and international media outlets, such as *The Diplomat* in the United States, *East Asian Forum (EAF)* in Australia, *Bangkok Post* in Thailand, *Jakarta Post* in Indonesia, *Lian He Zao Bao*, *Think China* in Singapore, *South China Morning Post (SCMP)*, *China-US Focus* in Hong Kong, *CGTN*, *Global Times*, *World Affairs* in China. RCAS researchers have actively participated in international conferences or study visits in the United States, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Myanmar, Cambodia, and other places.

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On 15 February 2025, visiting Prime Minister of the Cook Islands, Mark Brown, and his Chinese counterpart, Premier Li Qiang, signed The Action Plan for Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) 2025-2030 in Harbin, the capital of Heilongjiang province in northeastern China. The undisclosed agreement has raised the Cook Islands' tensions with New Zealand, with which it has constitutional ties. Western nations, including Australia and the US, share Wellington's concerns about Beijing's growing influence in the Pacific region.



▲ Cook Islands' Prime Minister Mark Brown visits National Deep Sea Centre in Qingdao, China, in this picture released on 12 February 2025. (Mark Brown, Prime Minister of the Cook Islands/Facebook via Reuters).

The Cook Islands were a dependent colony of New Zealand from 1901 to 1965. Afterward, they decided to become a self-governing nation in “free association” with New Zealand. In 2001, they signed a Joint Centenary Declaration, which committed the parties to “consult regularly on defence and security issues”. Based on this agreement, Wellington expected the Brown government to disclose the details of the proposed agreement.

The Cook Islands comprise 15 islands with a total population of 15,000 and an approximate land area of 236.7 square kilometres. The nation is situated halfway between New Zealand and Hawaii. These 15 islands are dispersed over about

2,000,000 square kilometres (770,000 square miles) of the South Pacific Ocean. Cook Islanders hold New Zealand passports. Regarding currency, the nation has its own banknotes and coins but officially uses the New Zealand dollar.

Brown, in power since 2020, has sparked a second controversy with New Zealand in a short period. Just weeks ago, he dropped the idea of issuing separate passports for Cook Islanders after Wellington insisted that the Pacific nation first revoke New Zealand passports.

A month before Brown's visit to China, New Zealand began requesting the details of the proposed agreement. Wellington's deputy prime minister and foreign minister, Winston Peters, made a phone call followed by a letter highlighting the need for transparency and proper consultation, citing the constitutional ties between the two sides, which include obligations to consult on defence and security matters. Brown set aside these concerns and proceeded with the agreement.

Brown regarded the Cook Islands-New Zealand relationship as reciprocal, rather than one that requires the Cook Islands to seek permission from New Zealand.

Cook Islands expectations of a 'reciprocal' relationship from New Zealand

He stated, "There is no need for New Zealand to sit in the room with us while we are discussing our comprehensive agreement with China." He added that because there were no clauses related to security or loans, consultation with Wellington did not fall under the Centenary Declaration of 2001. Brown regarded the Cook Islands-New Zealand relationship as reciprocal, rather than one that requires the Cook Islands to seek permission from New Zealand.

In Avarua (the capital of the Cook Islands, located in Rarotonga, the largest and most populous island), some locals termed New Zealand's attitude as "bullying", whereas opposition MP Teariki Heather opposed any agreement that could affect relations with New Zealand. He also organised a protest and submitted a motion of no confidence, which was unlikely to succeed due to a lack of support.

In China, Brown engaged in extensive discussions covering various topics, including investment, tourism, ocean science, aquaculture, agriculture, infrastructure (such as transport), climate resilience, disaster preparedness, creative industries, technology and innovation, education and scholarships, and people-to-people exchanges. He also sought China's assistance in acquiring new vessels to replace ageing ships for inter-island connectivity and in supporting seabed mineral development.

He reiterated his support for the "one China" policy, which should have appeased Beijing amid tense cross-strait relations. China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs

downplayed the hype regarding Brown's visit, terming the country's relationships with both the Cook Islands and New Zealand as friendly.

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Economic opportunities and aid from China

China established diplomatic relations with the Cook Islands in 1997 and elevated them to a comprehensive strategic partnership in 2018. Between 2008 and 2022, the Cook Islands received US\$517 million in foreign aid. New Zealand contributed the most, US\$219 million, while China, the second-largest donor, gave US\$112 million-more than double Australia's share. China's grants and loans have been utilised for public infrastructure development, such as the courthouse, police station, and agricultural equipment, for public events like the Pacific Mini Games, and in constructing the arena that hosted them. In partnership with New Zealand, China also helped build Te Mato Vai, a large-scale water infrastructure project to replace the Cook Islands' old water network.

Among Western nations, New Zealand initially took a moderate approach to China's rise but became increasingly concerned after Beijing's 2022 policing deals with the Solomon Islands and Kiribati. New Zealand's then Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern termed those agreements "gravely concerning".

US's attention turns to the Pacific region

Most importantly, China's growing influence in the Pacific region has brought the US back to the region. In February 2023, the US reopened its embassy in Honiara, the capital of the Solomon Islands, after nearly three decades, and in May of the same year, in Nuku'alofa, the capital of Tonga. Washington also plans to open an embassy in Kiribati.

Over 70% of the Cook Islands' economy relies on tourism, which was severely impacted during the Covid-19 outbreak. During this time, the Pacific nation chose to diversify its economy. China, the largest source of tourism globally and the second-largest economy, emerged as a natural option.

On the other hand, for a resource-hungry China, the Cook Islands are a natural attraction as well. Although the Pacific nation's total land area is small, due to the sparse distribution of 15 islands in the vast Pacific Ocean, it possesses a huge area under its exclusive economic zone. This vast ocean area is rich in polymetallic nodules containing essential metals such as manganese, cobalt, nickel and copper, all of which are necessary for technologies ranging from electric vehicles to advanced weapon systems.

Prime Minister Brown has said that “there is nothing to worry about” and has made the agreement public as promised. Even so, the Pacific region may still become another theatre of rivalry between China on one side and the US-led New Zealand, Australia, and the West on the other.

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About Author



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