



Cook Islands–China Relations and Implications for the Pacific

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The great power competition between China and traditional powers is intensifying in the Pacific region. China is looking for opportunities to increase its engagement with Pacific Island countries, including the Cook Islands. The Cook Islands is a self-governed Pacific Island country in free association with New Zealand (Government of the Cook Islands and Government of New Zealand 2001; Firth 1989). This relationship has continued to evolve and generate tensions, particularly regarding Cook Islands' sovereignty. It became more complicated after the visit to China by Cook Islands' Prime Minister Mark Brown in February this year where he held a meeting with Chinese Premier Li Qiang and attended the closing ceremony of the Asian Winter Games. This In Brief will discuss the controversies of the visit, perceptions in the Cook Islands of the visit and, briefly, the implications for the Cook Islands and the Pacific region at large.

Brown's visit to China

On 10 February 2025, Prime Minister Brown and delegates from the Cook Islands government travelled to China for the meeting with the premier and to sign agreements for closer cooperation between the two countries. Prior to the visit, New Zealand Foreign Minister Winston Peters expressed concern about the lack of adequate consultation around the content of the proposed agreements. Four agreements were signed between China and the Cook Islands during the visit. To ease the concerns and pressure from the New Zealand government, especially the foreign minister, the text of these documents was released by the Cook Islands government one week after the visit.

These agreements include an Action Plan 2025–2030 for the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on Deepening Blue Economy Cooperation, a similar MoU for the Blue Pacific Partnership in Seabed Minerals Affairs, and an Agreement on Economic and Technical Cooperation.

The agreements cater for the needs of both sides. For China, the Action Plan solidifies its relationship with the Cook Islands. China needs the support of the Cook Islands bilaterally and in regional organisations such as the Pacific Islands Forum amid its growing competition with traditional powers and Taiwan. For example, the Action Plan states that the two countries will 'engage in advance discussions prior to the Cook Islands' hosting of any regional meetings that China

ordinarily attends ... to identify ways in which we can support each other as both hosts and participants' (Cook Islands Ministry of Foreign Affairs & Immigration 2025:6). It is highly likely that China will attempt to leverage this commitment to block agendas that it believes detrimental to its interest, but this outcome is not guaranteed.

For the Cook Islands, the aim is to secure more support from China, the second largest economy globally and the second largest donor in the Pacific region by committed aid. Based on the Agreement on Economic and Technical Cooperation, the Cook Islands will receive RMB20 million (NZ\$4.6 million) in grants. In addition, the Cook Islands, with a landmass of 240 square kilometres, is keen to tap into the seabed minerals sitting in its massive exclusive economic zone of over 1.9 million square kilometres. The MoU with China on seabed mining cooperation will enable the Cook Islands, as a first step, to utilise China's financial and technical resources for research and exploration. Despite some public opposition (64% of Cook Islands respondents of an opinion poll were against mining the seabed; Tuari'i and Worth 2024), exploiting deep sea minerals is intricately tied with the Cook Islands government's desire for economic independence and notions of self-governance.

Tensions with New Zealand

Prime Minister Brown's China trip exacerbated existing tensions between the Cook Islands and New Zealand. In a Facebook post on 7 February 2025, Mark Brown addressed the nation, affirming the openness, transparency and sovereignty in the strong relationship with New Zealand. New Zealand responded on Facebook on the following day, stating that the Cook Islands had not properly consulted with New Zealand on the agreements with China and that consultation needed to happen before any agreements are signed. Winston Peters later stated that he wants to 'reset' New Zealand's relationship with the Cook Islands and that the Cook Islands has a responsibility to 'fully and meaningfully' consult with New Zealand when it comes to partnership with China. This was refuted by the prime minister who stated that a new constitutional agreement with New Zealand should reflect the Cook Islands as more independent. There is no indication that a new constitutional agreement is being discussed. The tensions appear

to be about the parameters of consultation, but at the heart is the issue of Cook Islands sovereignty.

The relationship between the two nations has been described as having the caricature of ‘New Zealand as benevolent benefactor and Cook Islands beholden beneficiary’ (Ma’ia’i 2025). As a further consequence of the Cook Islands’ signed partnership agreements with China, in June 2025 New Zealand implemented a pause to their bilateral support to the Cook Islands of nearly NZ\$20 million under the core sector support funding.

Local perceptions in the Cook Islands

Mark Brown’s visit to China sparked strong local backlash. The agreements raised alarm over vague commitments, fuelling fears of resource exploitation and, more gravely, the erosion of national sovereignty and social autonomy. The Cook Islands Opposition leader voiced concern about national security, saying that exercising sovereignty in international affairs should not come at the cost of national security or regional integrity.

Public debate around the Cook Islands’ growing ties with China was deeply entwined with anxieties about the nation’s longstanding relationship with New Zealand. Many locals saw the push for a separate Cook Islands passport, the prime minister’s visit to China, and the signing of new agreements as moves that could weaken or even undermine that relationship. There was broad support for the New Zealand government’s objections over a lack of consultation surrounding the China agreements — with many fearing retaliations from New Zealand and the potential loss of the rights and benefits Cook Islanders enjoy through their New Zealand citizenship. At a protest march organised by an opposition member of parliament, locals of all ages shared how studying and training in New Zealand had positively impacted their lives. One protester questioned if China had the ability to provide the same opportunities.

It is important to note that while Cook Islanders value the benefits of the relationship with New Zealand, some recognise the loss of autonomy caused by its colonial history. A local letter-writer to the *Cook Islands News* condemned the New Zealand government’s response to the prime minister’s visit to China as a display of neo-colonialism.

Implications

While the Cook Islands remains a part of the Realm of New Zealand for which New Zealand has sole security

capacity, it is unlikely China will be able to replace New Zealand’s influence in the Cook Islands. However, the recent tensions between New Zealand and the Cook Islands — amid protests and sovereignty-related anxieties — indicate that the terms of self-governance and free association may need to be renegotiated. Furthermore, the Cook Islands understands it does not have the capacity to counter Chinese strategic and intelligence operations within its exclusive economic zone, particularly if it allows Chinese maritime assets or infrastructure to operate or be developed unencumbered.

The implications of Cook Islands’ closer cooperation with China may also affect Pacific Islands’ unity amid the region’s quest for deeper cooperation and integration. Far from becoming a shatterbelt, the Pacific Island countries will likely weave a way through large state geostrategic competition and continue to employ diplomatic strategies that meet their own development goals, while continuing relationships with traditional partners for security.

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