

Bolster U.S.-NATO and U.S.-PIF Relations
to Better Compete with Chinese Global Influence

Capt. Hannah F. Zarsky

Squadron Officer School

Class 21D, Flight B-26

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Introduction

China challenges the United States hegemony in the realm of cultural influence. China is currently utilizing its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to build stronger partnerships globally, "bolstering people-to-people connections by cultivating student, expert, and cultural exchanges and tourism."¹ This paper will consider Chinese global partnerships through a cultural lens via the BRI by focusing on Chinese tourism and addressing climate change worries in Europe and the Pacific. This focus will help to determine where the U.S. is falling short in terms of its cultural influence. China is currently utilizing economic and environmental incentives to improve relationships and build influence within these regions. It is of strategic importance that the U.S. recognizes and understands China's cultural bridge-building tools and attempts to counter them. Also, the U.S. must understand what makes China's BRI initiatives attractive to its allies.

The U.S. can utilize and improve its existing relationships with key allies in Europe and the Pacific, namely members of the North Atlantic Trade Organization (NATO) and the Pacific Island Forum (PIF), to help dissuade a China-Taiwan conflict. First, however, the U.S. should build more robust relationships by finding out what is culturally vital to these allies. Research indicates that climate change and economic growth stimulation through tourism are essential to both populations of European NATO countries and PIF countries.² These two focus topics can be jumping-off points for taking action to increase American influence in these areas. Practically speaking, if U.S. government agencies, like the Department of Defense (DoD) and the Department of State (DoS), work in tandem, they can enhance their influence and encourage everyday American civilians to be stewards of positive cultural exchange. Additionally, these U.S. government agencies can help strengthen the relationships America has with its allies.

Where the U.S. is Losing Ground in Europe and the Pacific

A 2020 study from the Pew Research Center found that the U.S.'s reputation in Europe fell significantly in recent years.³ The approval rates from some of the U.S.'s NATO partners in this study were 41% for the United Kingdom, 31% from France, 26% from Germany, and 24% from Belgium. These low ratings were due to Europeans' general negative perception of the Trump Administration, the U.S.'s initial poor handling of the COVID-19 crisis, a decline in the belief that the U.S. respects the personal freedom of its people, and the U.S. withdrawal from the Paris Agreement, in addition to a growing European perception that China is the world's leading economic power.⁴

Furthermore, one can infer from recent research into European views which NATO nations would reject the idea of becoming involved in a China-Taiwan scenario. The research states that there are NATO members that do not like the idea of NATO playing any significant role toward China and reject the idea of formally considering China to be an adversary. They would instead limit the interactions between China and NATO to selective multilateral cooperation and talks. These objecting nations include France, Germany, Italy, and Portugal.⁵ Furthermore, this research looked at the public opinion of Europeans and found that they are “often skeptical toward NATO in general, as it was allegedly used by the United States to implicate European countries into two operations that were not considered effective: Iraq and Afghanistan.”⁶ Other areas of the world have equally complex and nuanced views of their relations with the U.S. and China.

In the Pacific, one of the cultural concerns of many islands' residents is climate change. Many islanders viewed the decision of the United States' withdrawal from the Paris Agreement

as demoralizing. Although the United States has rejoined the Paris Agreement as of February 2021, the withdrawal shook the trust of PIF members.

Additionally, there is a concern that the U.S. is not investing enough in the small islands in the Pacific. Furthermore, in some views, many Pacific islands are perceived to be places where the U.S. is only interested because of how the islands help "contain" China. This perception includes the U.S.'s "intense military and (colonial) political arrangements [in the region] that are explicitly designed to 'contain' China."⁷ This perception is problematic for the U.S. as it is harmful to maintaining solid relationships with its Pacific island allies.

Importance of Tourism and Climate in Europe and the Pacific

Tourism is a significant industry for the E.U. and its population of 446 million people.⁸ According to the E.U. Parliament's website, in 2018, tourism contributed to 3.9% of the E.U.'s GDP and 11.9 million jobs.⁹ Notably, the E.U. states that their tourism policies are evolving to include an environmental dimension, which will be "reflected in projects involving sustainable, responsible, and ethical tourism."¹⁰ As indicated by these new tourism policies, climate change is an essential concern to Europeans. A 2019 European Commission survey found that "93% of E.U. citizens see climate change as a serious problem and 79% see it as a very serious problem."¹¹

Climate change is also a massive concern for Pacific nations and is considered a looming threat. The PIF Secretariat has stated that climate is an "immediate and serious threat to sustainable development and poverty eradication."¹² For example, according to the United Nations, climate change is expected to decrease agricultural productivity and lead to a decline in Australia and New Zealand species diversity. Furthermore, the warmer water temperatures and

rise of acidity negatively affect fisheries and tourism, thus affecting livelihood sources for Australians and Kiwis, among other Pacific nations.¹³

Furthermore, in the Pacific, tourism is an essential source of revenue. According to a 2018 report from the Asian Development Bank, tourism is a crucial source of employment and income in Pacific island countries and is pivotal to poverty alleviation.¹⁴ For example, in 2018, the tourism industry employed 45% of people in Palau, 36% of people in Fiji, and 35% in Vanuatu. Furthermore, tourism was an integral part of many islands' GDPs: 60% for Palau, 54% for the Maldives, and 32% for Vanuatu.¹⁵ As a result of the application of research conducted on the importance of climate change concerns and tourism in the Pacific and Europe, China has been able to increase its influence in these areas.

How China is Meeting European and Pacific Tourism and Climate Needs

China is strategically influencing the E.U., including NATO members, and many Pacific nations, including PIF members, through tourism and climate-change initiatives. China has acknowledged the climate is an important issue for both the governments and populations of PIF nations. Research indicates that many Pacific islander nations are open to the BRI because it is “a source of funds for projects aimed at mitigating local effects of climate change.”¹⁶ The BRI says that it will take climate change seriously while respecting island nations' sovereignty. It has even included wording in its BRI documents to indicate China's dedication to meet the cultural need to address climate change. The BRI documents have added two critically important issues to island governments: environmental conservation, and climate change adaptation and resilience. China has also highlighted its support for the Paris Agreement by promising to incorporate environmental regulations in its BRI contracts. This promise includes wording like “ensuring the projects create minimal harm to the environment, use safe methods of building and

waste removal, protect environmental areas such as forests and fisheries, and even build environmental research centers.”¹⁷

In addition to addressing climate change worries, China has encouraged regional tourism and has made substantial economic impacts on the islands in the Pacific region in the past ten years. During this time, Chinese tourism to the Pacific region increased significantly. The increase in Chinese outbound tourism to the Pacific is strategically significant because it becomes "a point-of-entry for both political and economic activity in the region."¹⁸ According to United Nations World Trade Organization (UNWTO), Chinese tourism in the South Pacific during 2012-2016 rose greatly, increasing 59% in Papua New Guinea, 53% in Fiji, and 700% in Palau.¹⁹ A 2016 World Bank report suggested that Chinese tourists would make up more than 25% of all tourism in the South Pacific by 2026.²⁰ The U.S. should use this data to promote cultural exchanges and tourism to PIF countries to increase influence in the region beyond military might and counter Chinese influence in the Pacific.

In the last decade, Chinese tourism to Europe has increased significantly as well. According to the E.U., the number of Chinese tourists visiting the E.U. reached approximately 10.5 million in 2016. It rose to 25.8 million in 2018, accounting for \$250 billion and \$254 billion spent in those years, respectively tripling overall between 2006-2016.²¹ Additionally, the E.U. and China formed a tourism cooperative called the E.U. China Tourism Year, which launched in 2018 after being agreed upon at the 2017 E.U. China Summit. The initiative's goals include promoting intercultural understanding, supporting the development of new and better travel itineraries, and enhance travel and tourism experiences, all while aiming to increase promotion and achieve more sustainable tourism.²²

As previously highlighted in China's tourism initiatives with the E.U., it continues to strategically message the idea of contributing to combatting climate change within the BRI. The Chinese government is also sure to make "climate change adaptation cooperation a significant part of the BRI's sustainable development agenda."²³ The sustainable development agenda highlights the importance of climate impacts during construction and "strengthening cooperation in tackling climate change."²⁴ Globally, China has announced guidelines that promote their Green BRI and the BRI Ecological Protection Cooperation Plan and have stated that they would "invest \$20 billion to establish a specific climate cooperation fund to support other developing countries in addressing climate change."²⁵ To gain more positive influence in the region, the U.S. can learn from China's model for investment and cooperation with nations, but do it in a legitimately beneficial way for both the environment and the countries' populations.

Conclusion

Understanding China's cultural bridge-building tools and knowing what makes China's BRI initiatives attractive to our allies is essential. It is of the utmost importance that the U.S. learns from the negative perceptions of European NATO members and PIF members and works to improve those perceptions. It is vital to the U.S.'s strategic aims abroad to understand what is culturally essential to its allies and strive to increase cultural investments. As highlighted in this paper, two essential points of cultural importance to these allies are aggressively tackling climate change and aiding economic improvement and cultural exchange with tourism—both of which China is already addressing. The U.S. must focus on these goals to improve its relationships and influence with these allies. Dependable relationships are critical to NATO military allies and PIF country support to the U.S.

1Notes

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