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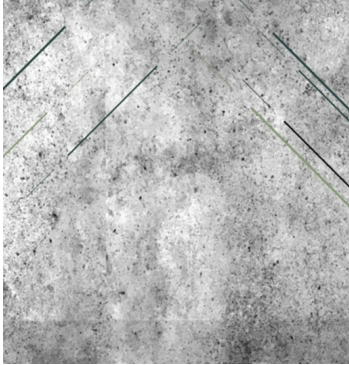
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Yohanes Ivan Adi Kristianto, Muhammad Fachrie, Wijoseno Cahyo Atmojo, Ahmad Rif'an

Universitas Tidar, Magelang, Indonesia.

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China-South Pacific Relations: China's Approach in China-Pacific Island Countries Economic Development and Cooperation Forum

Yohanes Ivan Adi Kristianto*, Muhammad Fachrie, Wijoseno Cahyo Atmojo, Ahmad Rif'an
Universitas Tidar, Magelang, Indonesia.

Abstract

People's Republic of China or commonly known as China has been transformed as one of the respected rising powers. China's hegemony in various regions is strongly supported by its economic power and military strength. The strength of these two aspects has influenced China's growing political power in international politics. In the economic aspect, China strengthens its influence by establishing economic cooperation relations with various international entities, including the Pacific Island countries. One form of such cooperation is the China-Pacific Island Countries Economic Development and Cooperation Forum. This research aims to answer the question of why China is attempting to intensify economic cooperation with Pacific Island countries. The authors decided to focus on the research with time scope 2011-2019 because China began to intensify the cooperation since 2011. Meanwhile, China's offer of financial assistance was last identified in 2019, so that year is selected to be the limit for the research focus. Furthermore, the conceptual framework utilized is regime formation and regional hegemon. We argue that the cooperation undergone by China in South Pacific is to establish an economic cooperation regime. By establishing the regime, China intends to become a hegemon in South Pacific, at once decrease the influence of the United States and Australia in that region and secure its political interest in Southeast Asia where this territorial has become a power struggle field between China and the United States.

Keywords: China; Regime Formation; Regional Hegemony; Economic Cooperation; South Pacific

Introduction

In several decades, the People's Republic China or well known as China has transformed into a rising superpower country. Although it cannot be categorized as a superpower country at this moment, China can already be defined as a "candidate for a superpower country" as the economic, military, and political aspects are improving annually and China has roles in countries (Abdullahi & Phiri, 2019).

China has begun to dominate the region through economic, socio-cultural, and security cooperation in Africa by putting the China government and its multinational corporations (MNCs) central role in the cooperation. For instance, China is serious about investing in Africa through one of its MNCs, namely the Industrial & Commercial Bank of China (ICBC) by buying 20.1% shares of the Standard Bank Group of South Africa (SBG). Also, the expansion of MNCs from China has increased the number of Chinese immigrants because those companies employ Chinese citizens (Li & Rønning, 2013).

With the European Union member countries, China has a more balanced relationship than its relations with countries on the African continent as the political and economic power of the EU and the member states that are relatively the same as China. Towards Europe, China has an interest in intensifying its exports, both raw materials and industrial products. (Zhang and Yu, 2013)

*Corresponding author: Yohanes Ivan Adi Kristianto. Universitas Tidar, Magelang, Indonesia.
Jl. Kapten Suparman No.39, Potrobangsari, Kec. Magelang Utara, Kota Magelang, Kabupaten Jawa Tengah
Email: ivan@untidar.ac.id

Nevertheless, the number of imports of goods from China by the EU member states shows the potential for Chinese domination efforts in Europe as far as has been ranked first as the highest exporting country in the EU from 2018-2020 (Eurostat, 2020).

In Southeast Asia (SEA), China's position is more dynamic. Although China has an economic cooperation agreement, particularly in trade, with some member countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), a regional organization membered by Southeast Asia countries, China is also considered a potential security threat by these countries. This is due to China's political steps to implement a rebalancing strategy in response to the presence of the United States of America (US) in SEA. In its implementation, China is reluctant to give up its influence on the issue of the South China Sea even though China has to deal with some ASEAN member countries (Widjaja, 2020).

The facts above shows that China can be grouped as a great power. If China has succeeded to penetrate its power in several regions such as Africa, Europe, and Southeast Asia, what about are its political activities in South Pacific?

Before going further, the word "South Pacific" needs to be defined first. In geography, according to Boudreau, et al. (2012), Oceania is a territory consisting of thousands of islands, which have unique flora and fauna characteristics, surrounded by the Central and South Pacific Ocean. In cultural studies, the word "Pacific Island", containing Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia, is more common rather than South Pacific (West & Foster, 2024).

In the political aspect, South Pacific is closely related to the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), a group of countries including Australia, Cook Islands, Micronesia, Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, New Zealand, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu. (Nadjiha, 2020) Fiji, although eventually rejoining, was removed from the PIF membership as experiencing ethnic conflicts resulted in two coups (Alley, 2001).

Thus, South Pacific can be defined as Pacific Island countries participating in PIF, locating in Oceania, inhabited by Melanesian, Micronesian, and Polynesian.

Then, what is the relationship between South Pacific and the China-Pacific Island Countries Economic Development and Cooperation Forum (CPICEDCF)? CPICEDCF, membered by PIF countries except Palau, Australia, and Tuvalu, is a cooperation platform that focuses on economic cooperation with its implementation in the form of eliminating trade barriers and financial assistance for the purpose of infrastructure development and human resource development in South Pacific (Henderson & Reilly, 2003).

How can China establish relations with South Pacific countries? China marked its first interactions with South Pacific by establishing diplomatic ties with Samoa and Fiji in 1975. China approached South Pacific countries back in 1990 through the annual meeting of PIF and provided its first grant of US\$ 3 million to development in all South Pacific countries in 1999. In 2004, China involved itself in South Pacific Tourism Organization (SPTO) as the first country outside South Pacific region and began to pressure South Pacific countries to recognize the One-China Policy. The argument of this policy is that the People's Republic of China is the only China (Seib, 2009).

The establishment of the CPICEDCF was marked by the first meeting in 2006, attended by heads of state from South Pacific countries who are candidates for members of the CPICEDCF and China's government that, started offering of a loan of US \$ 462 million to the member states after the first meeting. (Zhang and Lawson, 2017). Later, China promised financial assistance that could be provided in 2008 specifically to support small-medium enterprises (SMEs). The expectation is that the development of SMEs in the countries will raise the standard of living (Wen, 2006)

There are three points need to be explained related to why this topic should be researched. Firstly, no research has been found to discuss the relationship between China's hegemony efforts in South Pacific with the concept of regime formation and regional hegemon. Meanwhile, this study is specifically concerned with China's influence in the CPICEDCF. Secondly, this topic needs to be researched since the state actors involved are not only China and South Pacific countries, but there are other state actors such as the US, Australia, and Japan. By realizing their existences, the discussion on this topic has become more complex.

To investigate China's interest in the CPICEDCF, this study intends to comprehensively analyze the question of why China is attempting to intensify cooperation, especially in the economic field, in South Pacific region through CPICEDCF. The analysis is focused on the 2011-2019 as since 2011 China has been more intensively interacting through CPICEDCF. Meanwhile, the research question arises because of a research gap, namely the absence of research specifically discussing China's political steps in South Pacific through CPICEDCF with an analysis framework using the concept of regime formation and regional hegemon.

There are researches related to South Pacific. Damayanti (2018) explained that even though the US has "somewhat moved away" from South Pacific region, the US still attempts to maintain its military influence in the region through maritime-based policies. The existence of the US is due to the US's efforts to rebalance China's increasing influence. Rebalancing the US through its maritime military power to ensure that the US trade routes are not interrupted by China. (Damayanti, 2018).

Meick, Ker, and Chan (2018) conclude that the US military presence in South Pacific is still required to stem China's political maneuvers. Apart from CPICEDCF, China contributes to Pacific Island Forum (PIF) and the Melanesian Spearhead Group. Meanwhile, the US is also reluctant to let China increasingly get rid of the influence of Taiwan and Australia in South Pacific. The two countries mentioned are US partners, so the US has an interest to assist them. Also, Taiwan is one of the obstacles for China in promoting the One China Policy. (Meick et al., 2018)

Alunaza et al. (2018) underline that Australia's presence in South Pacific is to launch the Pacific Solution. With the willingness of South Pacific countries to assist Australia, this is expected to be able to stem the arrival of asylum seekers and irregular migrants, so a migrant-free, meaning all "unwanted migrants" are transferred to South Pacific countries for placement on detention. By placing those migrants outside the territory of Australia, this is considered able to reduce Australia's burden in managing asylum seekers and irregular migrants. (Alunaza et al., 2018)

According to Smith (2007), China's activity in South Pacific is not to become the main leader in the region and get rid of other major powers such as the US, but reduce Taiwan's influence in South Pacific. Smith finds that Taiwan claims to have received the support of six South Pacific countries (Wesley-Smith, 2007). However, South Pacific countries were not one of China's top priorities. Asia Pacific, Middle East and Africa are considered to be the major targets of China. Smith's claim needs to be questioned again because in fact China obtained an initial agreement with Papua New Guinea and Manus Island (Pryke & McGregor, 2020). Besides, Zhang says that Vanuatu was also willing to provide a military base for China (Zhang, 2020).

Zhang (2017) strengthen Smith's analyzes stating that China's main orientation is the support of the "One China Policy" by international communities. To ease its business, specifically in South Pacific region, China has prioritized economic assistance to South Pacific countries. China also changed its ways before the 2000s by conducting regular diplomatic visits to South Pacific countries. Zhang also concludes that China's approach to South Pacific does not intend to confront other major powers in South Pacific such as the US, Australia and Japan. However, Zhang's final point raises skepticism as other studies reveal the constellation between the Washington Consensus and the Beijing Consensus (Jarso, 2018).

The literatures above enrich the discourse of international studies related to South Pacific and show how South Pacific's relationship with other regions. With regard to China, no existing research has discussed the relationship between China's existence in South Pacific and China's idea of forming a regime to become a regional hegemon candidate. None of the available studies has analyzed China's interest in cooperation in the form of the CPICEDCF. Thus, this study aims to fill the research gap by analyzing the relationship between China's existence in the CPICEDCF and its efforts to form a regime. Regime formation and regional hegemon should be defined to assist answering the research question.

Before discussing what regime formation is, the definition of regime needs to be limited first. Krasner (1982) states that at least two core components of a phenomenon can be called a regime. The two points are power and norms. Accommodating Kenneth Waltz's perspective of realism, Kr-

asner argues that the possession of "power" is the basis of a regime formed because one of the reasons for the existence of a regime is to maintain power, the ability to move other entities without coercion (Weber, 1947). The real form of power includes various kinds such as military power, economic power, natural resources, and geographical position (Nye, 1990)

Meanwhile, norms are defined as standard ways of behaving that contain agreed values between the parties involved in a cooperation. Norms can contain rights and obligations. Krasner added that if the prevailing norms are changed, the form of the regime also changes, either it changes form or ends.

Using the concept of "power" elaborated previously, it means that China possesses power through its military force and economic strengths. China's military strength needs to be considered because China's military power is increasingly improving, so that it can become a political negotiation tool capable of affecting political decisions. Xi Jinping, who understood the importance of improving the quality of China's military power, then, restructured the Chinese armed forces and promoted transparency to overcome corruption issues in China's military by changing military regulations and enforcing the rules (Heath, 2019).

The concept of regime formation fundamentally discusses how a new regime is formed. This concept aims to analyze three points. First, regime formation purposes to answer whether the actors involved in the formation of a regime are successful in forming a regime. Second, if a regime is successfully established, the concept of regime formation, then, is concerned with the question of how long a regime can last and how it maintains its cooperation. Third, the regime formation aims to examine how a regime is dealt with the international environment.

The concept of regime formation has been debated by several experts such as Young and Moravcsik. Young offers the idea that a regime formation is instituted because of the existence of a "constitutional contract". It means that a regime is established after the bargaining process of interests between the actors involved. Often, these bargaining processes result in a written contract as a form of an evidence of the formation of a regime (Hasenclever et al., 2004).

Meanwhile, Andrew Moravcsik put forward the concept of regime formation based on the perspective of liberalism. He argues that cooperation and conflict are commonplace in the dynamics of international relations. If realists assume that cooperation is formed due to interstate bargaining, liberalists assume that state actors will interact based on both compatibility and incompatibility. Thus, cooperation, which led to the formation of a regime from the start, is based on preferences (Moravcsik, 1992).

The concept of regime formation put forward by Moravcsik and Young supports the refinement of the discourse of the regime formation concept by Marc A. Levy, Oren Young, and Michael Zürn. They reveal six classifications that outline the description of the regime. The description of the regime mentioned is in the form of regime actors, how the regime can be formed, and how the regime runs and maintains its existence.

The first point that became their concern regarding the elaboration of regime formation is the actors. Even though some of the political scholars put the states as the main actors, they view that both state actors and non-state actors have the same opportunity to play a role in forming a regime. The difference in the roles of the two is usually perceived from the coverage of concerned issues. Non-state actors tend to have a role in shaping regimes on specific issues and be positioned as parties that are consulted by state actors since non-state actors are considered as "experts".

Levy and his colleagues accommodate the realists' view by stating that the actors involved go through the bargaining processes first. These processes aim to find common interests, which ultimately become the basis for the formation of a regime. Comprehensively, they combine this phenomenon with the two-level game concept formulated by Robert Putnam. Bargaining processes occur as state actors need to adjust between domestic interests and the interests of other state actors involved in forming a regime (Putnam, 1992)

The second point that requires to be considered in analyzing regime formation is the process of forming a regime. The formation of a regime, according to Levy and his colleagues, needs to

undergo an agreement process as evidenced by the formalization of regulations, code of conduct, memorandum of understanding (MoU), or even a formal agreement. In addition, they emphasize that there are three alternatives for how a regime can make an agreement (Levy et al., 1995).

First, they mention that regimes can be in the form of self-generation or spontaneous regimes. This means that an agreement is produced without going through convoluted bargaining or negotiation processes as the level of convergence between the parties is relatively high, so they do not require much effort to reach an agreement. Ellickson (1991) calls this phenomenon as producing orders without law. The next typology of the process of forming a regime is a negotiated regime. This second type occurs frequently compared with other types. A negotiated regime means that the process of forming a regime is passed with the negotiation processes first. The last typology is about an imposed regime. This type of regime is controlled by a single powerful actor or a few powerful actors. Other actors joined tend not to have the power to refuse to participate in the regime (Ellickson, 1991).

Their third concern regarding the description of a regime formation is a stages of regime formation. The first stage in the formation of the regime is agenda formation. At this stage, the actors involved discuss why an issue arises, how they frame the issue, and how to take action on addressing the issue. The next stage is institutional choice. At this stage, the actors involved commence to discuss the form of institutions that will be formed. This frequently is ended with a memorandum of cooperation. At the end, the actors deliberate how they implement institutionalized agreements into concrete actions.

What underlies a regime to be formed, apart from the emergence of certain issues, also concerns Levy. They have investigated three motives sought by actors involved in establishing a regime. The first motive is seeking of power. A regime is formed because one or some of the actors involved are distributing power from the domestic level to the regional or global level. The second motive is the intention for knowledge sharing. For example, some countries do not have the knowledge to produce modern medicines. Meanwhile, some countries do not have access to find out what kinds of diseases are spreading. Thus, they can form cooperation in handling health issues by sharing knowledge about types of diseases and production of modern medicines. The third motive is a common interest.

At last, they highlight "the actors who will lead a regime" or called "cross cutting factors". Classified by the quantity of the leader of a regime, a regime can be led by an individual, several individuals and state actors. Meanwhile, Levy also classifies the character of the leader of a regime. First, structural leaders are individuals who lead and direct a regime because of the power distribution agenda of the countries they represent. The second type is intellectual leaders who focus on evaluating each process in the formation of a regime. Meanwhile, entrepreneurial leaders as the third type have the capability to combine ideas in the negotiation process and new ideas.

Before further analysis, the term "hegemon" needs to be defined first. Hegemon is defined as the only great power in a region. If there are other great powers in the region, it means that there is no hegemon in that area (Goldwin, 2004).

Mearsheimer (1990) states that the emergence of a hegemon is near impossible. This is because the cost of achieving absolute dominance in a region is too high compared to the benefits obtained. Even though they cannot turn into hegemon, state actors can still transform into a candidate of a hegemon or a potential hegemon. A potential hegemon is a state that has the capability to become a hegemon, but cannot be addressed as a hegemon yet. Generally, it is not possible to become a hegemon because of the existence of another great power where a potential hegemon is located (Mearsheimer, 1990).

In short, regional hegemon means a large power, relatively referring to state actors, who are in a region. Meanwhile, a potential regional hegemon can be interpreted as a candidate of a regional hegemon.

Prys (2008) in "Developing a Contextually Relevant Concept of Regional Hegemony: The Case of South Africa, Zimbabwe and Quiet Diplomacy" adds that the dominance of a regional hegemon is non-coercive. In the same work, Prys distinguishes in detail the definitions between hegemon,

Imperialism and dominance. She describes them by dividing it into three aspects, namely "perception", "projection", and "provision" (Prys, 2008).

Based on the aspect of "perception", the difference between regional hegemon and other terminology is that regional hegemon arises because there are followers who volunteer to follow a hegemon. In addition, a regional hegemon also has "responsibilities" to "guide" secondary states or states that declare themselves volunteering to join a larger force. Secondary states understand that they are unable to do something on their own. Therefore, they require the existence of a regional hegemon. "Regional acceptance" or the acceptance of a regional hegemon by secondary states is demonstrated by their desire to offer more responsibility to an extra-regional actor.

From the "projection" aspect, a regional hegemon in carrying out its action or spreading its values puts forward a persuasive approach, rather than a coercive approach. The real implementation of a regional hegemon of promoting its values can be in the form of the establishment of institutions, mediation of conflicts in the region, and financial assistance.

According to the aspect of "provision", a regional hegemon is positioned as a "last resort" if the secondary state in the regime, where a regional hegemon is also there, is deadlocked in implementing the cooperation agreement. A regional hegemon will direct or act to overcome these problems, even though they may not have the willingness to do so. One such example is "provision" by a hegemon commonly found in open trading systems.

Method

This is qualitative research since we analyze deeper the phenomenon. The qualitative data explored in this study is obtained through literature studies. Sources of the data sought are derived from books, journal articles, reports, government documents, working papers, theses, and online articles published between 2000-2024 related to the politics involving South Pacific countries. The data collected, then, is selected using triangulation method to ensure the validity of the sources. Each sections requires at least two literatures compared for data reduction processes. The stages of analysis consist of defining CPICEDEF as a regime, the maneuvers of China as the implementation of regime formation, and the political purposes of the regime formation.

Results

Global Fire Power reveals that the ranking of China's military power is the 3rd largest in the world. At least 54% of the total Chinese citizens are counted as combat-ready reserve components. Meanwhile, China has no less than 2 million active military personnel and budgeted more than US \$ 178 trillion for military purposes in 2020. The Chinese military defense equipment from various dimensions is relatively qualified because there are thousands of fleets ready to fight (*China Military Strength [2020]*, 2020).

From an economic perspective, China can be considered as a new power that is rapidly developing in the global economy. Since 1980 the average of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per year has increased by 10%. Moreover, since then, no less than 500 million Chinese people have moved out of poverty. (Morisson, 2013) The World Trade Organization (WTO) is even considered to be controlled by China, at least according to the US under Donald Trump's leadership (*Trump Threatens to Pull US Out of World Trade Organization*, 2018).

The significant rise of China's economy, reform of China's armed forces, and China's military position in the global arena shows that China has great potential to influence political decisions involving other state actors.

On the other hand, South Pacific countries depend on natural resources and geographical positions as bargaining power in political negotiations. For instance, in 2011, Fiji's mineral exports in the form of copper, gold, and silver increased significantly by 11%. By having forests covering at least 55% of the country's total area, Fiji also relies on timber as an export commodity. Meanwhile, Fiji's fisheries sector is also promising as this sector provides 36,000 tons of fish annually (Kiprop, 2019).

One of the other South Pacific countries, Papua New Guinea (PNG), has abundant mineral and natural resources. In 2013, seventy percent of PNG exports were mineral resources consisting of natural gas, crude oil, gold, copper, silver, cobalt, and nickel. Meanwhile, at the same time, twenty percent of the country's exports were in the form of agricultural products such as cocoa, palm oil, coffee and timber (Avalos et al., 2013)

Other South Pacific countries such as Vanuatu and Solomon Islands set marine products as their mainstay commodities. According to the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the value of Vanuatu's marine products increased significantly from US \$ 6.1 million in 1999 to US \$ 9.3 million in 2005. Meanwhile, the majority of the Solomon Islands population relies on income from sea catches. Trochus is the country's prime marine commodity with an average production of 400 tons per year (Owuor, 2019). Seidel and Lal (2001) reveal that 28% of the global Exclusive Economic Zone is located in South Pacific region, which within this boundary indicates an extraordinary wealth of tuna products. (Seidel & Lal, 2010)

With the fulfillment of the "power" and "norm" components, the interaction between China and South Pacific countries that are members of the CPICEDCF can be called a regime. Both China and South Pacific countries agreed on common norms, the recognition of "One China". To ease the agreement, China has made diplomatic visits repeatedly. First, in 2006, China visited Tonga to confirm her support for "One China". Then, in 2009, China visited PNG to meet Governor General Paulias Matane to confirm PNG's position. PNG and Vanuatu even supported China in the South China Sea conflict. Furthermore, Fiji showed its support for the "One China" norm agreed upon at the CPICEDCF by closing its trade attaché office in Taiwan in 2017. Other countries participating in CPICEDCF also agree to support "One China" as a value that is held firmly (Zhang, 2017).

Moreover, the signing of Program of Action (PoA) between CPICEDCF member countries and China indicates the establishment of norm between them. The first requirement to validate whether the collaboration is taking place the formation of a regime is to analyze whether there are actors involved. According to the last CPICEDCF PoA, ten South Pacific countries (Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Republic of Micronesia, Niue, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, and Republic Vanuatu) and China signed it on 21 October 2019.

The process of forming the CPICEDCF as a regime began when Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao inaugurated the first CPICEDCF meeting in Nadi, Fiji on 5-6 April 2006. At the first meeting, the Action Plan was mutually agreed upon with the commitment that both parties, China and the 8 South Pacific countries, routinely consult and hold dialogue (China and the Pacific Island Countries Sign the Action Plan of China-Pacific Island Countries Economic Development and Cooperation, 2006).

After the signing of the PoA in 2019, China has intensified its cooperation by conducting personal diplomacy with CPICEDCF member countries. For example, China and Fiji agreed on an MoU signed by both parties with one of the clauses that China provides a grant of 50 million RMB for the development of transportation infrastructure and communication technology. In addition, China also explores agreements with the two newly joined countries, Kiribati and Solomon Island, so that both of them release their ties of cooperation with Taiwan. Samoa also visited China a month later after the third meeting to ensure cooperation in investment (Fox & Walsh, 2019).

Furthermore, the stages of regime formation can be analyzed by looking at the vision, the form of the regime, and the operationalization of the CPICEDCF. For the vision, Wang Yang's statement at the CPICEDCF's 2nd meeting in China implies the vision of China in CPICEDCF as Wang Yang states that the collaboration through CPICEDCF is based on pragmatism. To achieve pragmatism, China utilizes financial assistance for various infrastructure development projects as a tool. Meanwhile, the form of the CPICEDCF regime is based on the PoA. Furthermore, China and South Pacific countries involved implement "operationalization", formalized in Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) of CPICEDCF in 2019 (China-Pacific Island Countries Program of Action on Economic Development and Cooperation, 2019).

Next, the driving forces that underlie China in the CPICEDCF cooperation are to become a hegemon in South Pacific region or as a regional hegemon in South Pacific region or as a regional

hegemon. Analysis related to China and efforts to become a regional hegemon are analyzed in depth in the next section.

The last element in the regional hegemon analysis is cross cutting factors implemented by China. After conducting the first meeting, China moved quickly by approaching Fiji and Papua New Guinea in 2009. The two South Pacific countries, which were originally affiliated with Taiwan, turned to support the PRC as the only sovereign China. In return, China donated US \$ 26.67 million plus US \$ 185.15 in the form of soft loans (Hanson & Fifita, 2011). China's leadership in managing this cooperation can be referred from the implementation of China's promise by training 2,500 human resources from Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Tonga, and Micronesia in 2014 (Huaxia, 2019).

China applies the concept of regime formation through the CPICEDCF since China has an interest in becoming a hegemon in the region.

As elaborated in the previous section, one of the requirements to become a hegemon is the ability to control a certain area. China's capability to become a hegemon can be analyzed through China's ambitions and achievements in increasing its military and economic power.

Table 1. Comparison of Official Military Spending Figures
Billions of RMB (Billions of USD)

Year	Ministry of Finance	2019 Defense White Paper
2017	¥1023.7 (\$151.5)	¥1043.2 (\$154.4)
2016	¥954.6 (\$143.7)	¥976.6 (\$147.0)
2015	¥886.9 (\$142.4)	¥908.8 (\$145.9)
2014	¥805.5 (\$131.1)	¥829.0 (\$134.9)
2013	¥720.2 (\$116.3)	¥741.1 (\$119.6)
2012	¥650.6 (\$103.1)	¥669.2 (\$106.0)
2011	¥583.0 (\$90.2)	¥602.8 (\$93.3)
2010	¥518.2 (\$76.5)	¥533.3 (\$78.8)

Source: Obtained from <https://chinapower.csis.org/military-spending/>, 2021

Referring to the **table 1**, China's military spending from 2010 to 2017 has increased quite significantly. From these data, there is a tendency that China has ambitions to strengthen its armed forces.

China's strong military capability cannot stand without the support of China's economic strength. China's economic strength also getting stronger from year to year. Based on **figure 1**, since Jiang Zemin's government, China's GDP has relatively increased. The increase in China's GDP so that this country arguably is called the strongest global economic actor lately proves China's capability from an economic aspect.

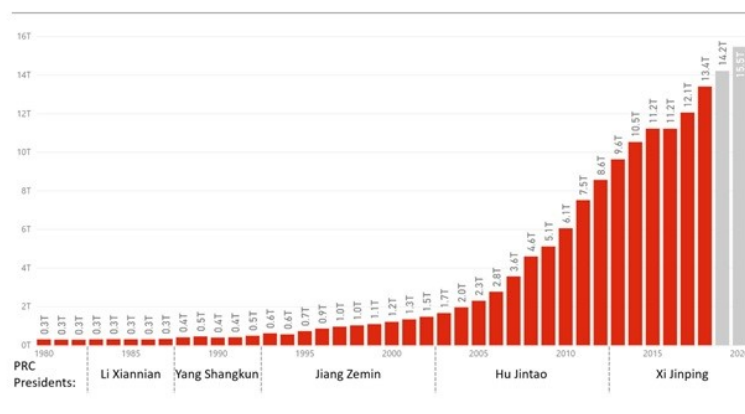


Figure 1. China GDP (trillions US\$)

Source: Obtained from <https://mgmresearch.com/china-gdp-data-and-charts-1980-2020/>, 2020

China's strong capability, both from an economic and military perspective, is to become a regional hegemon in South Pacific region, not a regional dominant. China's stance in seizing influence in South Pacific region is based on a non-coercive approach. South Pacific countries that participate in the CPICEDCF follow China voluntarily by relying heavily on economic assistance. Cooperation in the economic aspect is categorized into soft-politic, meanwhile, economic strength is grouped as soft power (Wong, 2016). This soft power application reinforces the notion that China prioritizes a persuasive approach. Regional hegemon concept is more closely related to the persuasive approach, while regional dominant is coercive approach.

The discourse on permission by the Vanuatu authorities to China to establish a military base in South Pacific country indicates that China's persuasive approach is successful (Torode & Wen, 2018). The offer of security cooperation indicates Vanuatu's seriousness in getting closer to China. This also means that Vanuatu is a follower of China. The participation of human resources from tourism industries in South Pacific to be trained by Chinese experts as well as South Pacific countries' support to China in the Paris Agreement and the issue of "One China" also prove that China has indeed succeeded in persuading South Pacific countries.

Discussion

However, China cannot yet be called a regional hegemon, but a potential regional hegemon. The US still has influences in South Pacific. During Obama's leadership, the US implemented a re-balancing strategy called "Pivot to the Asia Pacific". One of the strategies is the US's repeated steps to carry out diplomatic missions in the region, one of which is participating in the 2012 PIF Summit. Even though when Donald Trump takes the lead, the US influence wane, the US's presence is still in South Pacific (Chen, 2019).

Japan, who is interested in supplying marine resources from South Pacific, is also one of the great powers in South Pacific region. Since 1993, Japan has cooperated in fisheries with South Pacific countries. Through the Nauru Agreement, Japan has been allowed to exploit marine resources in South Pacific at a "tariff" cost of US \$ 50-60 million per year. As a return, Japan also facilitates training for human resources from South Pacific countries and provides soft loans for the countries (Tarte, 1997).

Another major power in South Pacific is Australia. Australia is the country most intensively donating money to countries in this region for development purposes. Australia relies heavily on South Pacific countries in the issue of refugees and asylum seekers. Thus, under every leadership, Australia routinely supports South Pacific countries with financial assistance to get closer to the region (Hawksley, 2009)

There are two reasons why China attempts to be a hegemon in South Pacific, namely to accelerate the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and secure China's geopolitical

interests in Southeast Asia.

By controlling South Pacific region, BRI implementation will be more complete. Although not the main target in implementing BRI, controlling South Pacific BRI routes around the Pacific secure China's trade routes from China's competitors.

Wibawati et al. (2018) predict that the economic-political and political-security aspects are the aspects most affected by the successful implementation of BRI. From an economic perspective, BRI is expected to facilitate access to logistics and labor. With more open access to logistics, superior commodities have the potential to dominate the market. If the countries that BRI passes through are unable to compete with commodities from China, the trade deficit with China can increase. Meanwhile, easy access to labor, in this case for China, can assist workers from China to obtain job opportunities in countries where BRI passes. (Wibawati, S.W. et al., 2018)

On the other hand, the Chinese military may also benefit from the existence of BRI. The opening of sea access, for example, support the Chinese navy to cover the area conflicted, like in Southeast Asia. Gompert (2013) argues that if entities want to control an area or even the world, they need to apply the concept of "Sea Power". By controlling South Pacific waters, China has the potential to further secure its interests in Southeast Asia from the US. Besides, the geopolitical position of South Pacific is very advantageous because it is relatively close to Southeast Asia. (Gompert, 2013)

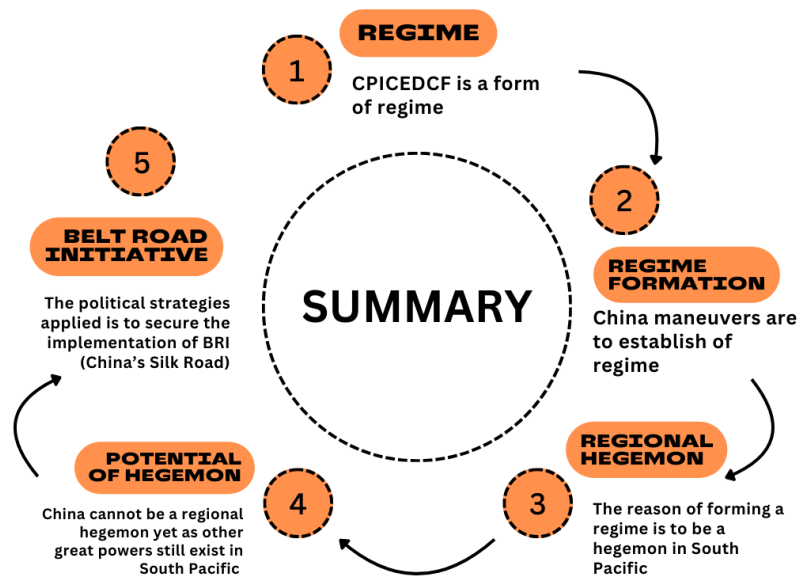


Figure 2. Summary of The Analysis

Source: Processed by the authors, 2024

Conclusion

China's activities in South Pacific through the China-Pacific Island Countries Economic Development and Cooperation Forum (CPICEDCF) is a media for China's aggressive foreign policy towards becoming a potential hegemon in that region. Using mainly financial assistance and infrastructure investment, China at first attempts to establish a regime, which is formed into CPICEDCF. By having CPICEDCF and transformed into a potential regional hegemon, China amplifies its interest to strengthen political and economic position. The success of strengthening the position is proved through the acceptance of CPICEDCF member countries the One China policy and creating common norms.

China's attempt to be a hegemon faces challenges from the United States, Australia, and Japan. Those countries also have political interest to be maintained in South Pacific. The United

put South Pacific as a buffer zone for potential geopolitical conflict with China in Southeast Asia, Australia needs South Pacific for refugees' settlement, and Japan exploits marine resources. CPICEDCF is a key instrument on which China can implement an overall geopolitical strategy to protect the Belt and Road Initiative, a non-competitive, soft power strategy that leverages economic cooperation to gain influence rather than direct confrontation.

At last, China increasing influence in the South Pacific through the CPICEDCF is part of a deliberate attempt to reorganize the balance of power in the region, not a dominant player, but indicates over the long term that China wants to become the major political and economic power in the South Pacific. We recommend scholars, students, or researchers who are interested in researching topics related to China's activities in South Pacific to analyze the impacts of China's maneuvers in South Pacific towards political dynamics in Southeast Asia. Also, researches using quantitative method can also enrich the discussion towards political dynamics in South Pacific.

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