

ASIA PROGRAMME

A CHINA'S SOFT POWER IN THE PACIFIC: THE EXAMPLE OF THE SOLOMON ISLANDS AND THE PACIFIC GAMES 2023 PROJECT

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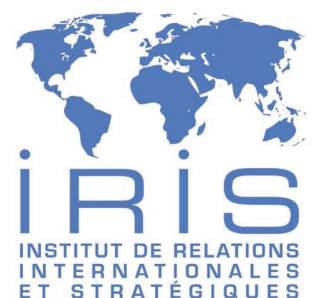
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In parallel with the growing interest for the Indo-Pacific region, Oceania has proven to be a strategic pivot for great powers, not only through its geolocation but also its resources, its spaces, and its actors. However, and although it already was the subject of a European scramble during the colonial period, Oceania and its island states are no longer in the spotlight nowadays due to the significant development of China and its presence in the region and worldwide. Yet, the Oceania Island states are certainly geographically small, but they prove to be of crucial support especially given the current context in the South China Sea and for the Indo-Pacific Axis.

The relations between the island states of Oceania and China have a long history. In fact, during the colonial era, Chinese communities were established in the region for labor in the extensive coconut plantations organized by the colonial powers in Samoa, Fiji and Papua New Guinea and for cotton plantations in French Polynesia. After the opening of China to liberalism in the late 1970s, the competition between Beijing and Taipei in the Pacific Islands triggered and has been a constant factor in the diplomatic relations in the region. Yet, although in recent times this relation has been linked to political instability in the islands and economic developments, Chinese contact with the region dates to the colonial era. But since the early 1970s Taiwan has struggled to gain diplomatic recognition and regain the UN membership it lost in 1971. China, on the other hand, has sought to isolate Taiwan diplomatically.

As Oceania is beginning to become a coveted region, the RPC government is willing to apply every possible tool in its foreign policy in order to extend its influence, mainly through its soft power assets. China's soft power strategy was officially adopted during the 17th Communist Party Congress in 2007. It can be defined as a combination of intense and extremely active promotion of China through diplomacy and culture (Li, 2009; Courmont, 2013). The Pacific states such as the Solomon Islands, Nauru, Paulu, The Marshall Islands, Tuvalu or even French Polynesia are the subject of this strategy of influence. At the diplomatic level, this strategy is mainly asserting its strategic schemes and ways to evict the Taiwanese government from the international maps. At the same time, China is highly applying its soft power strategy in the region and specifically in the

Pacific Islands as their needs could be solved thanks to Chinese interventionism in the field of economic development.

As China is using its economic power through infrastructures' diplomacy, it is interesting to study how the PRC government is applying this concept in the region and especially through the case of the Solomon Island. This insular developing country is switching from Taiwan to the PRC, as a consequence of the fact that China managed to apply its soft power in the island. The aim of this paper is to see what is China's strategy in the insular states in Oceania, with a focus on the example of the Solomon Islands and the Pacific Games 2023.

THE PACIFIC GAMES 2023, A CASE OF CHINA'S SOFT POWER THROUGH INFRASTRUCTURE AND SPORT DIPLOMACY

Oceania, a continent mostly known for rugby and team sport, has a large number of regional sporting events such as the Pacific Games. These sports competitions are an opportunity for countries to defend their colors and values, but it is also a strategic moment for them to assert their presence throughout the region. It therefore serves their national interest. Those events, like the Olympic Games, are tools for states to assert their soft power, whether by participating or by organizing them. Thus, when the Solomon Islands proposed the organization the Pacific Games on their soil, it was a manifestation of soft power of a developing country that sees potential benefits in Oceania. It does not remain without a reaction from an external power including China, which is taking advantage of this major event to assert its influence in Oceania but also to continue to wage its diplomatic battle against Taiwan.

The Pacific Games 2023, a nation-building opportunity for the Solomon Islands

First of all, it is obvious that the plan to organize the Pacific Games in 2023 by the Solomon Islands is an opportunity both for the country and for its main foreign partner, China, to address their soft power. To understand the essence of the issues and the challenges of the project, it is essential to review the reasons that push that small country to organize such an event.

The Pacific Games is a continental multi-sports event based on the framework of the Olympic sports. The event concerns only the archipelagic countries in the Pacific Ocean. Six countries are participating: Fiji, French Polynesia, New Caledonia, Papua New Guinea, Tonga and Vanuatu. The last edition of the Pacific Games was held in Apia, Samoa, in 2019. For its first time in Honiara, it is an opportunity for the Solomon Islands to prove that the country is capable of handling an event of this scale. By holding this regional event, it is hence a chance to put to Solomon Island on the map and count as an influent state, and that by using a soft power strategy.

In fact, when the Solomon Islands Parliament passed in March 2017 a legal framework enabling the country to host the 2023 Pacific Games, Manasseh Maelanga, Minister for Home Affairs, expressed that hosting the Pacific Games would support the goals of “economic development and nation-building” (Darnel, 2017). The economic impact from this type of manifestation is not something that should be under-evaluated. The Solomon Islands, a developing state with \$1.551 billion of annual GDP, could increase its income from a boost in its touristic, trade and infrastructure sectors. In order to welcome such an important sport competition, the archipelago needs to build new infrastructures from sport complexes to tourist buildings and accommodations, which benefits to the national interests and incomes in a long-term. More importantly, this event and its international recognition could have increasingly positive impact on the visibility and therefore serve soft power of the Solomon Islands. From international prestige to a promotion of the national sporting prowess and values, the Solomon Island would improve its image both within and outside the country.

However, the other aspect of this project is the cost of hosting such a massive event. In the light of the Olympic Games, events from this nature always exceed the original budget, which could lead to indebtedness. In addition, the Solomon Islands is not an economically stable country, the nation is in a precarious position to deal with such challenges (Westley-Smith, 2016). That is why some foreign actors present themselves as an answer to this financial uncertainty by funding projects. As a matter of fact, China, through its soft power strategy and international influence plan mostly carried by the Belt & Road Initiative and the massive investments in various regions, usually proposed its support in building infrastructures in foreign and partners countries (Foukouna, 2021). The Pacific

Islands are one of the many targets identified in China, and Beijing sees an opportunity to point up in the Solomon Islands territory. The Pacific Games 2023 is therefore a good opportunity for Beijing to anchor a long-term relationship with the country.

The Chinese partnership in the Pacific Games, an illustration of the shift from Taipei to Beijing

The Pacific Games are a good example of the shift in the Solomon Islands relationship from Taiwan to China as it originally took place with its long-time partner to be taken over under the wings of the PRC. As a consequence, would this project and this event illustrate the effect of Chinese soft power on the Pacific Islands and this via sports diplomacy but also by infrastructures?

While the Solomon Islands were one of the Pacific's greatest allies for Taiwan, the archipelago decided after 36 years of diplomatic relations with the island to side with Beijing. However, beyond being an ally, Taiwan has been a crucial economic partner for the Solomon Islands. With nearly \$12 million per year, it was the largest external economic contributor (Dayant, 2019). As for the Pacific Games, it was Taiwan that was originally in the driver's seat to help setting up this massive project for its long-time Pacific partner. Originally, the Solomon Islands reached an agreement in July 2019 with Taiwan to help the construction of facilities for the event, including a national stadium (Mackay (b), 2020). This collaboration was an opportunity to strengthen ties between Taiwan and the country, as well as to increase Taiwan's base in Oceania and in particular in the Pacific Islands.

However, the diplomatic shift to Beijing has been a causal and/or correlation of this change from the Solomon Islands. Indeed, shortly after the Solomon Islands switched diplomatic allegiance from Taiwan to the People's Republic of China, a deal was reached with Beijing for the construction of the national stadium with the aim of welcoming the Pacific Games in 2023. China declared its intention to provide a budget of \$70 million to build this infrastructure. (Wilkinson, 2020). The switch of allegiance can be interpreted as a national interest and more importantly because of the economic and infrastructure opportunities that Beijing was prepared to offer to the archipelago. Consequently, China managed to use its infrastructure diplomacy, here by sport diplomacy, in order to gain

influence within the country but also at the regional level. It is interesting to underline that the project contains many layers that illustrate China's soft power strategy in the Pacific islands.

The Pacific Games 2023 project: “a symbol of friendship”¹ between the Solomon Islands and China

Ultimately, it is the Chinese investments that paved the way for the development and the acceleration of the Pacific Games project. For both countries, it is above all a sign of collaboration and diplomatic relations. This collaboration is the setting in an abyss of a long-lasting partnership between Beijing and Honiara. The Chinese soft power mainly based on cooperation and economic and humanitarian aid, particularly to developing countries, is clearly illustrated here. Thus, it is interesting to see the scale of the project between China and the Solomon Islands to understand the impact of its strategy on this event and on the Solomon Islands territory.

Foremost, from an infrastructure point of view, the partnership between the two countries has played a key role in order to prepare and organize in totality the sportive event. From 2019, the Chinese government promised an investment of \$8 billion for a period of four years for the preparation of the Games (Wilkinson, 2020). Those new investments are an opportunity for China to improve its image in a positive way in the new partner country. The epicenter of this project is the construction of the new stadium. This brand-new venue, for a total cost of \$53 million, includes a 10 000-capacity stadium with 1 000 VIP seats and six other facilities including a six-court tennis facility, an Olympic-sized swimming pool, an athletics track, a hockey field, and a multi-purpose sport hall (Mackay (a), 2020). With such infrastructures, sport and economy will potentially increasingly develop in the Solomon Islands. It could influence the capital city to be a landmark for future regional and international events. Moreover, it proves that China is capable of being a reliable partner in this kind of projects. The Solomon Islands' Public Accounts Committee (PAC) mentioned this landmark project will benefit the local

¹ Forewords of the China's Ambassador in the Solomon Islands, Li Ming during the signing ceremony of the Pacific Games 2023 infrastructures project.

community and not only China and its workers who are coming to help set up the project.

More importantly, it proves that China manages to seduce its partners in providing assistance in their nation-building projects and development. It is clearly an application of its money and infrastructure diplomacy, and secondly its sportive diplomacy. As a matter of fact, the Pacific Games 2023 project is the paroxysm of the China partnership shift which could be seen by the official declarations. The Pacific Games 2023 project was officially signed by the Chairman of the Solomon Islands National Hosting Authority and Secretary to the Prime Minister, Jimmy Rodgers, his Chinese counterpart, Gong Rui, and the Counsellor of economic and commercial affairs in the Chinese Embassy in Honiara. On top of that, the Solomon Islands Prime Minister and the Chinese Ambassador, alongside seventeen members of the Chinese technical team on this project, witnessed the signature which underlines the significance of this act for the two countries. After the officialization of the project, Manasseh Sogavare declared that it “is one of the largest infrastructure projects, funded and build by the People’s Republic of China in any PRC’s partner Pacific Island countries”. In addition to the allegiance toward China, the Solomon Islands government declared its friendship and cooperation as a prowess: “For this gift, I convey my sincere gratitude to the President, the Government and the people of the People’s Republic of China”.

This “Pacific sport extravaganza” as a consequence on the representation of the impact of the influence of China in the Pacific Islands. From a sportive insular islands’ event to a cooperation with one the main global power, the Solomon Island takes advantage of the willingness of Beijing to increase its presence in the Pacific and worldwide through its soft power strategy. Nevertheless, the Pacific Games 2023 is not only the project in which China has been increasing its presence, but may be interpreted as an example more than an objective. Indeed, one may see through this example how China manages to apply its soft power to increase its influence and counter the influence of Taiwan in the region and more widely in the world. Therefore, the Solomon Islands is the perfect case study to see this new tendency within the region, and how it is evaluated by local actors. Indeed, this allegiance toward Beijing was made after a group work led by the Solomon government investigate on the pros and cons on the recognition of the PRC.

IS THE SOFT POWER STRATEGY OF CHINA IN THE SOLOMON ISLANDS EFFECTIVE?

The example of the Pacific Games 2023 highlights that one of the practices of China in order to put into action its soft power is the support of foreign countries on their domestic projects and more precisely in terms of infrastructures, allowing to strengthen economic and political cooperation. Beyond this example, the Solomon Islands is a country where China has a strong influence and is gaining a footprint thanks to its soft power strategy that can sometimes have both positive and negative consequences.

A win-win partnership?

China's soft power strategy particularly focuses on helping and becoming a long-term partner in the developing countries. The Solomon Islands, one of the poorest countries in the Pacific, is a perfect target for the Chinese strategy. Li Mingjiang, a Chinese scholar, introduced in *Soft Power: China's Emerging Strategy in International Politics* published in 2009 the numerous objectives the Chinese leaders assign to soft power, including the fight against misperceptions and misunderstanding of China and the improvement of the international image of the regime, including helping the Solomon Islands through many projects (Li, 2009).

First, China has certainly reached its main goal when the island decided to switch allegiance from Taiwan to the PRC. China's foreign policy is indeed based on the recognition of Beijing over Taipei, through different means. In the case of the Solomon Islands, the Minister of Foreign Affairs Jeremiah Manele condemned Suidani's reference to Taiwan "as a state rather than a province of the People's Republic of China". Manele declared it to be "only one foreign policy that binds the country together, Solomon Islands has adopted a One China Policy", adding that the "Solomon Islands continue to uphold friend to all and enemies to none and will work with all within the confines of Solomon Islands foreign policy". This recognition came dramatically fast and brutally put an end to more than 36 years of diplomatic relations with Taiwan.

Therefore, the power of China's economy and investment, the first world trade power, has an important impact on the perceptions of the nation abroad and in fine in the way foreign countries are feeling incline to diplomatically switch from Taiwan to China. This "win-

win” strategy, especially in the case of the Solomon Islands, is the key to understand Beijing’s diplomatic gesture and several countries. In that case, the Solomon Islands was Taiwan’s main partner in the region. The fact that the country was influenced by China highlights the fact that its strategy is persuasive and effective. Also, it indicates how China managed to gain drastically influence in the Pacific region and especially with specific countries in the Pacific Islands. However, to what extent China’s soft power strategy is effective in the Solomon Islands?

The influence of China’s soft power in the Solomon Islands, partnership, or dependence?

Then, after that the Solomon Islands switched its diplomatic allegiance towards Beijing, the soft power of the Asian superpower started to become even more visible. Nevertheless, the use of soft power by China raised question about when the influence and the Chinese presence in the Solomon soil is stopping. Since the officialization, its existence is increasingly prominent in the archipelago.

De facto, the Solomon Islands signed countless partnerships essentially economic and infrastructural ones. Besides the Pacific Games 2023 infrastructures plan, the Solomon Islands signed a 75-year renewable lease with the China Sam Entreprise Group for the Tulagi Island can be added. The Tulagi Island was a former WWII key battle site between the US and Japan which raised some concerns about the strategic and trouble used of this location in the future. Indeed, it could be a strategic place for China especially within the context in the South China Sea and the Indo-Pacific axis. One other example of this prominent presence in the Solomon territory a deal with China Railway in 2019 which had a lot of controversy. The Solomon Islands signed an 825 million dollars agreement with the Chinese company to restart production at the Gold Ridge mine on Guadalcanal. Even though the country will pay notion for the infrastructure and could benefits for this project, various counterparts are at stakes. Through this project, it is China which will own the property which call into question the limit of the soft power aims of the PRC in the Solomon Islands. At the end, this project after the dissatisfaction of the local population was canceled in October 2019 by the national government which declared it illegal (Robertson, 2021).

The list is long about the number of investments and infrastructure that China, through national companies, is implementing in the Solomon Islands (Map 1). From the Alligator Creek on Guadalcanal bought by the JQY Ltd. Company to develop a fishery project, to the China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation (CCECC) who built two bridges on the islands: the Mbokokimbo Bridge and the Mberande-Aola. In addition, the CCECC is planning to construct a terminal at the Munda Airport. One point that is important to underline is that those projects do not include the local population or even are trying to exclude it. On the Alligator Creek site, a fence was built to prevent access by locals (Barrett, 2019).

Those examples are illustrating the quiproquo that the Chinese soft power imply in the Solomon Islands. There is a duality between the willingness of local development and the autonomy of the country notably with the which to develop itself. Nevertheless, this development is currently mainly effective through Chinese support. And China knows perfectly that its schemes in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative, is taking place thank to its soft power strategy through an infrastructure diplomacy. This shows that the soft power strategy of China can be questioned and be more seen as a smart power strategy. Moreover, this strategy comes with a lot of counterparts for the hosting country which could led to what we could called as “neo-colonialism”. Nevertheless, this presence even if it widely spread in the Solomon territory had a lot of consequences including dissatisfaction and negative responses from the local population.

A strong Chinese presence that leads to violent local reaction: the limits of China’s soft power strategy in the Solomon Islands

Soft power has its negative impact, depending how it is used, and what effects it carries in the long term, and also depending on the reception of the country that implements such a strategy. The question therefore is how China is welcome. The Chinese influence in the Solomon Islands has some negative impacts. Indeed, the archipelago is facing an instable situation, and in some ways, the presence of China within the territory has something to do with some riots and protests from the local population, as China has become a target for several movements.

Since November 2021, the Solomon Islands has been the subject to violent riots from the

population, a symbol of dissatisfaction about the government management and especially with foreign presence. The reaction from the population against the Chinese presence was already an issue when the Pacific Games 2023 agreement was signed. There were protests against the venue of the Chinese team of about eighty people, including the new Chinese ambassador, after the diplomatic switch to help preparing the project (Mackay (a), 2020).

The Solomon Islands already suffered from violent riots in 2006 but the 2021 crisis is deeper and longer. Because of a decreasing economy and years of delayed infrastructure projects, the population accused its leaders to be the outcast of its foreign policy and interference. Furthermore, the Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare even declared that he accepted a bribe from the Chinese government (Rising & McGuirk, 2021). Even if the foreign presence is common for the country such as when the United States provided direct foreign aid for Malaita, one island from the archipelago, or even Australian with its military security role on the territory, the Chinese presence has not been accepted in the same way and was the outbreak of the fire.

As the Solomon Islands was at the heart of the battle between China and Taiwan, one can notice that the strategic scheme and presence of Beijing has some backfire. Its presence and interventionism in the territory impacts the image of the population towards China in a negative way. The event of November 25th, 2021, confirms this perception of the global power. About hundred protesters were marching in the capital and some violent acts occurred: a grass hut next to the Parliament and a police station were set to fire. On top of that, some building in Chinatown also suffered from fire (Baron, 2021). The crisis went on and led to shortages of food and essential supplies. From this political crisis, it is the Chinese diaspora and population that is suffering from the local negative image, and the shift of allegiance of the Solomon Islands government from Taipei to Beijing is one of the main reasons. As a consequence, Australia deployed a hundred of troops in order to reestablish peace and the national government also required the help of New Zealand (Pluyette, 2021).

The Solomon Islands government is showing its support to China. However, one notices a different attitude on the side of the local population. The Solomon Islands is the perfect example of the antagonism around China's soft power strategy. It also demonstrates why

the region remains an “arc of instability” with the challenges and the risk from foreign and regional countries. It is therefore a regional matter and not only an isolated example.

IS CHINA’S SOFT POWER IN OCEANIA THAT OUTSTANDING?

China’s influence in the Pacific Islands, friendship or diplomatic and strategic interests?

With the example of the Solomon Islands, one can finally wonder what is the place of China within the region. This presence was initiated as a consequence of a diplomatic battle with Taiwan and to consolidate its presence, China is activating its checkbook diplomacy. This financial support in poor and isolated territories is one of the main and most effective prerogatives within the population. The policy of the checkbook in exchange for diplomatic allegiance appears to be very effective as China’s place in the region is progressing.

Taiwan now has only four diplomatic supporters in the Pacific after the Kiribati Islands switched towards Beijing in 2019. Taiwan’s last four supporters, the Marshall Islands, Palau, Nauru and Tuvalu, are among the last fifteen nations that keep allegiance to Taipei’s government. To illustrate this fact, one can take the example of Papua New Guinea, which signed a \$12 million deal with China. The country is also getting closer to Beijing and has already switch to the PRC. Also, within French Polynesia, China through the Hainan group bought two hotels, and the city of Papeete and Faa’a became twin cities with Chinese cities. Even during the Covid-19 pandemic, the Confucius Institute sent surgical masks to French Polynesia for humanitarian help, serving its soft power influence in the region.

By developing its influence through soft power in the Pacific Islands, China develops its partnership in a continent that is strategically crucial. It is an asset for the Indo-Pacific axis but also for the Belt & Road Initiative. EEZs are also an important argument for its influence in the Pacific zone. It is a place full of fishery activities, very rich in geological and mining resources. It is also an obvious entry point to reach Antarctica and the Austral lands.

The diplomacy and the soft power are key tools for China. Within less than a decade, China

managed to switch most of the partnerships in the Pacific towards its advantage showing a victory against the government of Taipei, raising the attention of other powers. The United States and its long-time partners such as Australia or France have presence in Oceania which is challenged by the new alliances that China is implementing, especially with the insular states that are welcoming its helps in exchange for diplomacy and policy alignment. China's soft power proves successful, but it is not homogenous in the whole continent and could also raise questions regarding its nature usually describe more as a sharp power strategy rather than a soft one.

Can Taiwan's presence in Oceania and the action of its allies tarnish China's soft power strategy?

The Solomon Islands is certainly a very interesting example when it comes to reactions and resistances, but ultimately China is more and more strongly anchored in Oceania at various levels: strategic and economic, energetic, diplomatic, cultural, etc. However, one must not forget that Taiwan has a long history of being a preeminent player in the region and intends to remain influential despite China's strategic goals through its soft power influence.

Taiwan also used the checkbook diplomacy to stay influent in the continent. In this prospect, Taipei can use the support of the United States and Australia. Those actors are indeed unlikely to switch allegiance towards Beijing because of their own interests. Even if China's carrot and stick strategy seems successful, Taiwan could play on the fact that sometimes the Chinese aid and projects are not a success. In the light of this statement, Nauru broke relations with Taiwan in 2002 before finally returning to diplomatic relations with Taiwan. The reason for this return was the fact that China aid in the country was never materialized (Rich, 2019). Also, several concerns about the "hard" way of using soft power by the Chinese government could lead to a return to diplomatic relationship with Taipei. After signing various infrastructures contracts with China, especially in the touristic field, Palau decided to reestablish its relations with Taiwan after having some concerns regarding the influence of China. Even if there is a domino effects because of the Chinese foreign politics which can be enlightened with the Solomon Islands example, Taiwan could still have a secondary influence in the region, by using its soft power in

order to establish relations with the local populations. In June 2001, the Export Import Bank of Taiwan agreed on a \$25 million loan to the Solomon Islands. The purpose was to foster peace by compensating the victims of the ethnic conflict that had ravaged the islands since 1998 (Baron, 2021). It can also count on the Chinese diaspora as an essential asset for its soft power diplomacy.

Other regional actors could be an asset if the Chinese influence is taking too much place in their own strategic scheme. French Polynesia could be a future partner if the soft power influence of China in the territory is becoming preeminent. The sinologist Hinano Guérin even declared that “we have to be careful. We were all surprised by the speech of the President of the Republic toward Chinese investments. We are living at a very interesting moment when French Polynesia will have to do well. To this maritime power of China, French Polynesia cannot afford not to cooperate with the People’s Republic of China, but it must clearly define the terms. And since we are a French collectivity, that must be done with the French government. [...] We no longer have the will to have to choose our camp. We are no longer in a dichotomous world with great economic powers. It is played out with several poles, and I think that the Polynesian population simply wants to develop economically, which is quite legitimate.”

China could have the monopoly on the Pacific Islands but other powers such as Australia, France and the United States did not completely give up against the impact of China’s soft power strategy and influence.

The limits of China’s soft power strategy: critics of an image

China’s influence can be considered a smart power strategy rather than a soft power one. Hence, some countries are benefiting from this strategy and are now questioning the integrity of the Chinese influence in their own territory but also in Oceania.

The Chinese image is usually decreasing because of its hard way of processing international and national issues. On top of that, the Covid-19 pandemic, especially at its early stage, had a negative consequence for the Chinese influence abroad, including in the Pacific. At the beginning of the pandemic, countries such as Israel, the United States, Australia, New Zealand or the Solomon Islands banned Chinese foreigners on their soil

(Four, 2020). The willingness of the Chinese government to have a positive image that mixes tradition and modernity suddenly stopped with the sanitary crisis. With the pandemic, there was a boomerang effect, which highlighted the cons of China's image: an authoritarianism of generalized population surveillance and information control system. Consequently, China's soft power is decreasing, paying the symbolic consequence of this worldwide crisis. As already mentioned, the Pacific Games 2023 project collaboration endured these negative consequences because the Chinese delegation was not welcome as planned because of the pandemic context and the anti-Chinese public opinion (Mackay (b), 2020).

On the other side, Taiwan took advantage of the pandemic through its diplomacy of masks and managed to improve its image. As a consequence, Taiwan is securing the benefits of soft power as China's image potentially declines. Sydney Yueh, associate professor of Communication Studies at Northeastern State University asserts that "Taiwan's success in fighting Covid-19 and helping other countries by donating masks and medical devices helped raise its international visibility and generate goodwill abroad". In the end, Taiwan aids in the Pacific islands during the pandemic clashed with the One China policy and the Chinese effort to marginalize Taipei (Foukona, 2020).

In addition, the two largest states in Oceania, Australia and New Zealand, are also depicting the Chinese image by accusing the PRC for non respecting Human Rights (Pluyette, 2017). Each time, "the goal is to increase Chinese influence, lessen negative media treatment of China and promote the Chinese authoritarian model", explains Joshua Kurlantzick, researcher at the Council on Foreign Relations. But it reaches its limits in Oceania, like in other regions where democratic systems stand. The Uyghur crisis is also decreasing the positive image that China is trying to build through its soft power influence, and although it does not have an important impact in small insular states in the region, it does affect China's image in Australia and New Zealand.

CONCLUSION

The case of the Solomon Islands and the Pacific Games 2023 is interesting in order to see

the growing influence of China's soft power in Oceania but also to evaluate its limits. Indeed, the Pacific Games 2023 is the turning point in terms of Chinese influence in the Solomon Islands. After 36 years of close relations with Taipei, Honiara decided to sign multiple agreements with the PRC. From a model to develop the country with an infrastructures plan and a massive sportive regional plan, the Solomon Islands has been seduced by the Chinese offer. More than an economic partnership, this diplomatic adjustment reveals however how China is gaining influence in the region and especially through its relations with the Pacific Islands. It has helped Beijing to gain influence and image in the region through the Pacific Games 2023, but it also shows its limits through the reception and the reactions of the public opinion. This example enlightens the fact that even if China is trying to shape its image abroad and gain influence through its soft power diplomacy, the method used by Beijing can be questioned. On top of that, the aim of soft power is to leave a positive footprint abroad, which is not actually observed in that case. Also, the biggest countries from the region do not abandon competing with China as they are maintaining an influence in the Pacific Islands through military and humanitarian aids but also societal, cultural and historical links. The current international situation with the sanitary crisis is also damaging the foreign perceptions of China and Taiwan has regained influence in Oceania. ■

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THE EXAMPLE OF THE SOLOMON ISLANDS AND THE PACIFIC
GAMES 2023 PROJECT**

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