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## China's Peace Ark: Building Bridges with Pacific Island Nations

*By Loro Horta*

### SYNOPSIS

*At a time when China's navy is synonymous with assertiveness and Beijing is focused on the country's soft power projection, there is one Chinese asset that has gone unnoticed. The People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN)'s hospital ship, Peace Ark (known in Chinese as Daishan Dao), is one of the few instruments in China's diplomatic toolbox that is contributing to slowing the decline of China's image in the region.*

### COMMENTARY

Gone are the days when pundits wrote about the rise of Chinese soft power. Today, China has a smaller group of friends around the world. The state of Chinese soft power has deteriorated and President Xi Jinping has recognised the problem. In January 2021, President Xi told senior Communist Party officials that China should expand its circle of friends and to present to the world a more [credible, lovable and respectable](#) image of China. However, China's many territorial disputes with its neighbours and its growing military power makes this a daunting task.

### The Peace Ark in China's South Pacific Diplomacy

In service since 2008, the Chinese navy's hospital ship Peace Ark has been one of the most successful instruments in China's attempts at addressing its image problem. The [Peace Ark](#) is the largest and probably the most modern hospital ship in the world. With a team of over 100 medical personnel on board, the ship conducted its first overseas mission in 2010 under the banner Harmonious Mission 2010. The ship visited Djibouti, Tanzania, Kenya, the Seychelles and Bangladesh. Many other missions followed in which the ship and its crew were warmly received.

By 2018, the Peace Ark's good actions were obscured by the growing assertiveness of the Chinese navy and coast guard. Peace Ark's missions declined and the magnificent ship seldom left Chinese waters. In recent months, however, as competition between China on the one hand, and Australia and the United States of America (US) on the other, intensified in Timor Leste and the South Pacific, the Peace Ark has returned. Following the signing of a law enforcement and security agreement between China and the Solomon Islands in April 2023 and a somewhat exaggerated response from Australia and the US, Beijing is determined to retain its gains in the region.

However, China is aware that too much of an overt effort to consolidate its gains in the region is likely to lead to an energetic response from Australia and its allies. In May 2023, Chinese Foreign Minister, the seasoned and sophisticated diplomat Wang Yi, [visited Timor Leste and several Pacific island nations](#). The minister's visit was aimed at convincing other Pacific island nations to follow the Solomon Islands in signing security agreements with Beijing. This led to a frantic diplomatic offensive by Canberra and its allies. As a result, China is now adopting more subtle tactics to defend its interests in the region.

In early September, the Peace Ark visited Timor Leste and five Pacific island nations. During its visit to Timor Leste, the ship's [medical team treated](#) over 10,000 patients of whom 50 underwent complex surgical procedures. From the humblest people to the elites, Timorese flocked to the Peace Ark. In a country where medical services are basic, the Chinese goodwill gesture was highly appreciated. This was the second time that the Peace Ark had visited Timor Leste, the first in 2017. The ship went on to visit the other five Pacific island nations including the Solomons.

### **Uneasiness in Canberra**

While Australia has been warning Timor Leste and the Pacific island nations on the dangers of closer ties with China, the fact of the matter is that most of the states see China's growing presence in the region as beneficial. For decades, the small Pacific island nations have been dependent on Australia and were totally ignored by the US. Chinese aid and diplomatic support reduces the need to be dependent on Australia and the US. After the Solomon Islands signed the security agreement with China, Australia significantly [increased its aid](#) to the country and the US reopened its embassy in the Solomon Islands after three decades of absence. However, the leaders of the Pacific islands are far more sophisticated than the world realises.

### **Going Forward**

China's growing presence in Timor Leste and the South Pacific is a fact. Australia must let go of the illusion that the region is its exclusive backyard. On the other hand, Beijing should give more attention to additional forms of cooperation with the region. Trying to get regional states to sign security agreements with Beijing will bring little benefit to China and a strong reaction from Australia and its allies.

The visit by the Peace Ark to Timor Leste has improved China's image remarkably following a serious downturn in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. The case of

Timor Leste and the south Pacific island nations shows that Chinese soft power can recover provided Beijing adopts the right strategies.

Ironically, the Peace Ark, one of China's most effective diplomatic tools, was inspired by the US navy's hospital ship, Mercy. Until the commissioning of the Peace Ark, the Mercy was the largest hospital ship in the world.

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