

Australia Uses Soft Power to Counter China

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Australia is increasingly using “soft power” to respond to China’s growing influence in the Indo-Pacific, according to Matthew Maury, chief executive of the Australian Council for International Development (ACFID). While China’s military expansion is a concern, regional stability may rely on diplomacy, aid, and development programs alongside defense measures.

China is considered a major strategic challenge in Australian policy circles. Officials face the task of maintaining trade relations while preparing for potential security risks, including

developments involving Taiwan. Deputy Prime Minister and Defence Minister Richard Marles has said that China's military growth contributes to "security anxiety."

China's influence extends beyond military activity, including loans with long-term obligations and agreements with smaller Pacific nations. Australia counters these efforts through development programs that aim to strengthen regional partnerships and support stability.

Mr. Maury highlighted the role of Australia's aid initiatives. "Australia has made it very clear that they're not going to step back from the relationships in the Pacific," he said. "They see the aid program as a really important piece of soft power and contributing to peace and stability within our region, as well as strong relationships."

The concept of "soft power," coined by the late political scientist Joseph Nye, emphasizes influence through diplomacy, culture, and assistance rather than military force. Investments in aid and development can achieve results efficiently compared with conventional defense spending.

Australia has increased its development assistance, with record levels exceeding \$2.1 billion, about 75% directed to the Pacific. This support covers infrastructure, health programs, and security partnerships, including a 2023 agreement providing refuge for Tuvalu's citizens affected by environmental pressures.

Foreign Minister Penny Wong emphasized Australia's commitment to the region during a speech in Fiji, highlighting the importance of stable regional partnerships. Projects such as port construction are seen as strategic investments that support regional stability and reduce the potential influence of other actors.

By combining diplomacy, development aid, and targeted security measures, Australia aims to strengthen its influence across the Indo-Pacific while promoting a stable and secure region. Officials say soft power helps maintain Australia's regional presence without relying solely on military strength.