# The Pacific seabed emerges as a new strategic frontier in regional competition



Recent developments in the Pacific have underscored the escalating strategic importance of the ocean seabed, signalling a shift in regional maritime focus from undersea cables to seabed resource exploitation. This change presents new challenges and opportunities for countries across the region, notably Australia, in managing and securing their maritime interests.

In late March, a Chinese research vessel was sighted near Australia's southern coast. Opposition leader Peter Dutton expressed concerns that the vessel was likely engaged in ‘mapping undersea cables’, a claim echoed by others. However, analysis from The Strategist, the Australian Strategic Policy Institute’s commentary platform, suggests that the real strategic contest lies not with the cables themselves but beneath them, at the seabed level. Exploitation of the seabed is rapidly becoming a critical arena for exercising influence, contesting international rules, and testing regional alliances.

Two recent key events highlight this intensifying focus on seabed resources. In February, the government of the Cook Islands signed an agreement with China granting licences for seabed surveys. Shortly thereafter, the Metals Company (TMC), based in Vancouver, began lobbying the United States government to circumvent the International Seabed Authority (ISA) for commercial mining permissions, seeking direct authorisation from the US. These activities reflect the broader context of renewed great-power competition over access to critical minerals essential for digital infrastructure and green energy technologies.

This emerging resource rivalry has potential implications for international governance and environmental protection. The International Cable Protection Committee identifies seabed mining as the principal long-term threat to undersea cables due to the risk of physical damage from dredging, sediment disruption, and mechanical collisions during mining operations. While most undersea cable routes are publicly known, the concern raised is that exploratory missions, such as China’s, might be laying the groundwork for future seabed extraction, posing a risk not just to the cables but to the stability of international maritime governance.

The ISA, established under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), has issued numerous exploratory permits but no commercial mining licenses to date. China, as the principal funder of the ISA, has secured multiple exploration contracts internationally and through regional partnerships such as that with the Cook Islands, underscoring its strategic approach to securing access to seabed resources.

In contrast, the United States has not ratified UNCLOS nor recognised ISA authority. Frustrated by the ISA's slow progress and the growing advocacy for a global moratorium on seabed mining, firms like TMC are advocating for a bypass of the multilateral system via the 1980 Deep Seabed Hard Mineral Resources Act, a US domestic law. Reports indicate that the Trump administration is considering an executive order to authorise deep-sea extraction in international waters outside UNCLOS frameworks, marking a potential shift toward unilateral national authorisation.

Such unilateral moves could encourage other powers, including China and Russia, to similarly disregard multilateral seabed governance norms. This fracturing of authority risks producing a patchwork of self-authorised claims and weakened regulatory oversight. It could particularly impact smaller Pacific nations, some of which, like Papua New Guinea, are dealing with consequences from failed ventures like the Nautilus Minerals project. Others, including the Cook Islands, simultaneously endorse seabed mining and criticize global climate inaction.

Within Australia, responses to seabed mining have been inconsistent. While two states have legislated bans on offshore mining, the federal government did not join over 30 nations calling for a moratorium on seabed mining. Canberra’s approach to undersea security has thus far concentrated on concerns about espionage and sabotage of cables rather than the broader implications of seabed resource competition and environmental risk.

Under UNCLOS, states are obliged to exercise ‘due regard’ for overlapping activities on the seabed, particularly between cable laying and mining. However, the absence of binding rules or dispute resolution mechanisms specific to cable-mining interactions means that current practices rely on avoidance and ambiguity rather than clear governance.

The Strategist suggests that Australia could assume a leadership role by convening a regional dialogue aimed at establishing operational norms for seabed activity. Such norms would encompass early notification protocols, transparent consultation, and robust environmental risk mitigation measures, creating a Pacific-specific code of conduct to govern the seabed domain effectively.

As the seabed becomes a critical frontier in the strategic competition within the Pacific, the evolving governance landscape will shape the region's security, environmental sustainability, and economic opportunities. Australia's engagement in these processes will determine its ability to influence and safeguard its undersea interests amid these emerging challenges.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

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