International Relations of the Pacific Islands

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Summary

The Pacific Islands region occupies 15 percent of the world’s surface, yet there have been relatively few analyses of the international relations of Pacific Island countries (PICs). Existing analyses tend to view the region through the lens of the interests of major and metropolitan powers. They consequently focus on how geopolitical competition between those powers is likely to develop in the region but afford little consideration to the agency of PICs to shape how that will occur. This chapter argues that analysts need to reimagine the international relations of the Pacific Islands to capture how PICs are exercising their agency in pursuit of their interests and to manage the behaviour of great and metropolitan powers. It argues that this reimagining should involve three analytical moves. First, it should subvert stereotypes of ‘smallness’, ‘weakness’, and ‘fragility’ which tend to dominate the policy and academic literature of metropolitan powers about the region. Second, it should better recognise the agency and activism of PICs captured by the concept of the ‘Blue Pacific’. Third, it should account for the dynamism and diversity of the nature and interests of the entities and actors that make-up, and are involved in, the Pacific region.

Keywords

Pacific Islands, international relations, security, regionalism, geopolitics, climate change

Introduction

The Pacific Islands region consists of 24 states and territories: Papua New Guinea (PNG), Solomon Islands, Fiji, Vanuatu, New Caledonia, West Papua, Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), Commonwealth of Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI), Palau, Republic of Marshall Islands (RMI), Kiribati, Nauru, American Samoa, Cook Islands, French Polynesia, Hawaii, Niue, Easter Island, Pitcairn Islands, Samoa, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Wallis and Futuna. These states and territories have a combined land mass of only 552,789 square kilometres (84% of which is PNG) and a combined population of only 11.2 million (8.9m of which is in PNG). But the ‘large ocean island states’ of the ‘Blue Pacific’, occupy 15% of the earth’s surface:
30.57 m² of the Pacific Ocean. Much existing “global geopolitical analysis” tend to view the region through the lens of the interests of major and metropolitan powers and is “not focussed on the Pacific” (O’Keefe, 2015). It consequently is occupied with how geopolitical competition between those powers is likely to develop in the region but affords little consideration to the agency of PICs to shape how that will occur.

Existing analyses of the Pacific Islands also tend to divide the region into three sub-regions: Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia. This division was mapped and named by French botanist and explorer Rear Admiral Jules-Sébastien-César Dumont d’Urville, and has been extensively discussed and critiqued as reflecting long-held ideas about race and social evolution (Kabutaulaka, 2015). However, “despite research showing the complex genetic and cultural admixtures across the Pacific, these artificial categories were reproduced in writings, academia, and social discourses and Pacific peoples unconsciously assimilated them as part of their new forms of identities” (Ratuva, 2021). These categories are consequently frequently used today by PICs, reflected in their coalescence into three sub-regional geographic and cultural groupings. Melanesia includes PNG, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Fiji, the French territory of New Caledonia, and the Indonesian provinces of Papua and West Papua. Polynesia comprises Hawaii, Samoa, Tonga, Niue Cook Islands, Tokelau, Wallis and Futuna, and French Polynesia. Micronesia includes Palau, Guam, Nauru, the Republic of Marshall Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, and Kiribati.

This chapter argues that analysts need to reimagine the international relations of the Pacific Islands to capture how PICs are exercising their agency in pursuit of their interests and to manage the behaviour of great and metropolitan powers. It argues that this reimagining should involve three analytical moves. First, it should subvert stereotypes of ‘smallness’, ‘weakness’, and ‘fragility’ which tend to dominate the policy and academic literature of metropolitan powers about the region. Second, it should better recognise the agency and activism of PICs captured by the concept of the ‘Blue Pacific’ and demonstrated by their ‘New Pacific Diplomacy’ (Fry & Tarte, 2015). Third, it should account for the dynamism and diversity of the nature and interests of the entities and actors that make-up, and are involved in, the Pacific region.

While a sense of regional solidarity remains strong, and for simplicity this chapter refers to ‘the Pacific Islands’ as a region, there are important differences between PICs. PICs are diverse, ranging from the comparably populous and linguistically diverse PNG, with 8.7 million people, to Niue, with a culturally and linguistically homogenous population of 1400 people. PICs also
have differing political and traditional systems and levels of economic development. They span a range of different statuses, from sovereign states through to colonial entities, and they have differing constitutional relationships with metropolitan states, as well as complex diplomatic and historical relationships (Naupa, 2017). Palau, RMI, and FSM have Compacts of Free Association with the United States (US) (granting citizens access to live and work in the US and aid support, in return for American oversight of their security and defence interests). This provides them considerable economic support and immigration opportunities, in exchange for US defence access and protection. The Cook Islands and Niue have similar relationships with New Zealand. Furthermore, the region still includes several colonies: American Samoa, CNMI, Hawai‘i, and Guam are US territories; New Caledonia, French Polynesia, and Wallis and Futuna are French overseas collectivities; Tokelau is held by New Zealand; the Pitcairn Islands is a British overseas territory; and West Papua is occupied by Indonesia.

This chapter begins by discussing the relations and connections between PICs before and after their encounter with European colonisers, identifying key moments of emerging regional solidarity and international activism. It then analyses the period during which internal instability in several PICs emerged and regional responses. It then considers how geopolitical competition is impacting the region and analyses how PICs are seeking to manage and respond to it by exercising their agency and reiterating their autonomy. This move has crystallised in the concept of the ‘Blue Pacific’, which PICs have been developing since 2017, but which has long roots in Pacific thinking. This chapter concludes by considering how PICs are navigating the crosscurrents that they face as they enter the third decade of the 21st century and argues that they are doing so with energy and purpose.

**The coalescence of the ‘Pacific Islands’ region**

Although the term ‘Pacific Islands’ is now commonly used to describe the region, Tongan intellectual Epeli Hau‘ofa (1994) has argued that, when it was first applied by colonial powers, this term was “derogatory and belittling” as its implied distance and separation. Hau‘ofa instead preferred to focus on how ‘ocean peoples’ had settled the Pacific region over 2000 years and who viewed their world as a ‘sea of islands’, rather than ‘islands in the sea’. This highlights how connections, relationships, and travel between PICs have occurred for millennia, with trade, inter-marriage, and warfare facilitated by the sophisticated techniques Pacific peoples developed to navigate the ocean (Denoon et. al., 2004; Howe, 2007).
Foreign explorers and colonial powers introduced borders, state proclamations, and racial classifications without the consent of the region’s inhabitants as a convenient means to impose different identities on a diverse region. But even after European colonisation, inter-regional relationships continued to develop as transport links grew. To facilitate cooperation, the South Pacific Commission (SPC) was established by the Canberra Agreement (1947) between the region’s colonial powers, Australia, France, New Zealand, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom (UK), and the US. The objective of SPC was to encourage a sense of regional identity, and to “promote the economic and social welfare and advancement” of Pacific islands inhabitants. The absence of Pacific islander representatives at the inaugural meet in 1947 was stark. However, by 1950 there were over 40 representatives from 14 Pacific Island territories at the first South Pacific Conference held in Fiji. The gathering of the ‘oceans people’ at the Nasinu conference in Suva was a novelty for colonial officials, observers, and media reporters, who tended to think that creating ‘a sense of region among Pacific Islanders was difficult and unnatural’ (Fry, 1997, p. 182).

But ongoing dissatisfactions with the SPC motivated Pacific islanders to shape greater regionalism during the 1960s, when decolonisation began in earnest, as Pacific leaders identified that regional cooperation would be key to advancing security and development (Bainivanua-Mar, 2016). In 1965, the sixth South Pacific Conference in Lae, PNG, “represented a watershed in regional affairs for both island participants and European observers” (Fry, 1981) because Ratu Kamisese Mara, the Minister for Natural Resources of Fiji, led a walkout with other Pacific islander delegates. Mara later described his walkout as a “rebellion”, “arguing that the ‘confrontation’ with the colonial powers was necessary, because ‘the powers seemed incapable of realizing that the winds of change had at last reached the South Pacific and that we peoples of the territories were no longer going to tolerate the domination of the Commission by the Metropolitan powers’” (Fry, 1981, p. 462). In the same year, Mara initiated the creation of the Pacific Islands Producers’ Association (PIPA) to develop closer cooperation in supplying bananas to New Zealand.

In 1971 the limited scope of political discussions within SPC was the impetus for frustrated Pacific islanders to create the South Pacific Forum (later, the Pacific Islands Forum, PIF) so that they could exercise more agency at the regional level (Fry 2019). As a Pacific-led forum, the PIF was a ‘political organ for the decolonised South Pacific’ (Crocombe, 1983; Herr, 2006, p. 189) and it was consequently able to deal with contentious political issues such as decolonisation and nuclear testing, and broader issues of trade, governance, and security.
Decision-making in the PIF is generally by consensus, reflecting perceptions of what has been described as ‘the Pacific Way’ (although this is a contested term). Decisions are non-binding and are released in communiqués at the end of annual leaders’ meetings or special purpose meetings.

Although the PIF was Pacific-led, Pacific leaders believed that including Australia and New Zealand as members would maximise the influence of PICs on the global stage (Fry, 1991). While this has, at times, been the case, commentators have questioned whether the perceived dominance of Australia and New Zealand hindered cooperation among PICs (Baker, 2015; Frazer & Bryant-Tokalau, 2006; Fry 2019; Lawson 2017). This perception has been enhanced by Australia and New Zealand providing most of the funding for the PIF Secretariat and its activities.

One of the first examples of Pacific regional diplomacy was PICs’ response to the threat posed by atmospheric and undersea nuclear testing by France, the UK, and the US from 1946. Activism by Pacific leaders, churches, women’s groups, trade unions, and civil society led to the Nuclear Free and Independent Pacific movement (Dvorak, 2020; Firth, 1987; Maclellan, 2015; Teaiwa, 1994). Australia and New Zealand supported this activism and, along with Fiji, took France to the International Court of Justice over nuclear testing in French Polynesia in 1973. Through the Rarotonga Treaty (1985) the PIF also established the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone, and secured commitments from the nuclear-declared states of China, France, Russia, the UK, and the US not to manufacture, station, or test nuclear devices, or dump nuclear waste in the Pacific Ocean (Blatt, 2016).

Another important example of Pacific regional diplomacy was efforts to secure and regulate maritime territories. Maritime resources provide critical sustainable food sources, economic drivers, and export opportunities for PICs. PICs played a key role in negotiating the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, and in the first two decades of the 21st century in efforts to delineate maritime boundaries in the face of rising sea levels (Naupa, 2022; Strating & Wallis, 2021). PICs have also been active at a regional level, establishing the Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA) in 1977 to respond to distant-water fishing nations trawling the Pacific Ocean. PICs also negotiated tuna catch limits through the Parties to the Nauru Agreement (PNA) in 1982 (Aqorau, 2019; Pala, 2021) and the South Pacific Tuna Treaty in 1987 (Tarai, 2015).
After decolonisation, PICs also began to assist each other to respond to internal security challenges. During Vanuatu’s transition to independence in 1980, Prime Minister-elect Father Walter Lini requested help from the PIF to respond to the secessionist ‘Santo Rebellion’. The regional response was conducted by the PNG Defence Force, with logistical support from Australia and New Zealand (MacQueen, 1988). Former PIF Secretary General Greg Urwin (2005, p. 14) described this as ‘the first security action in the modern, independent Pacific having any kind of regional flavour’.

The May 1987 coup d'état in Fiji led by Lieutenant Colonel Sitiveni Rabuka presented the PIF with its first significant political crisis of a member state. At their meeting in Apia, Samoa, PIF leaders expressed “deep concern and anguish” about the coup and “noted the increasingly complex environment in which the Forum was meeting” (SPF, 1987). With the Secretariat located in Suva, Fiji, “the atmosphere of uncertainty encouraged member states of the South Pacific Forum to take cautious positions on security questions” (Alley, 1990). Samoa’s former minister Han J. Keil recollected that the 1987 PIF leaders’ meeting was “dominated by the events in Fiji and how the region should respond to the crisis”, but it was fortunate there was the ‘Pacific Way’ of resolving challenging situations (Boxall, 2006). The inception of the Forum Regional Security Committee in 1990 was one response to the experiences of “international developments affecting regional security” and desire to collect and share intelligence for “the needs and priorities of member countries in the area of law enforcement cooperation” (SPF, 1987; 1990). These experiences included the violent uprising in Kanaky/New Caledonia related to the independence movement, the two Fiji coups, French nuclear testing in the South Pacific, climate change, terrorism and economic security.

To increase regional coordination, in 1988 PIF leaders also established the Council of Regional Organisations of the Pacific (CROP; formerly the South Pacific Organisations Coordinating Committee, SPOCC). Nine organizations make up CROP along with the PIF: the Forum Fisheries Agency, Pacific Aviation Safety Office, Pacific Power Association, Pacific Islands Development Program, Pacific Community, Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Program, South Pacific Tourism Organization, and the University of the South Pacific. The Secretary General of the PIF is the Permanent Chair of the CROP.

In 1986, the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) was established by Solomon Islands, PNG, and Vanuatu to forge closer cooperation at the sub-regional level. The New Caledonian pro-independence movement, Kanak Socialist National Liberation Front (FLNKS) formally joined two years later, and Fiji in 1996. According to former PNG Prime Minister and signatory to
the agreement formally establishing the MSG, Sir Michael Somare, the MSG was formed for two ‘main reasons; namely decolonisation of Kanaky/New Caledonia and cessation of nuclear testing in Moruroa’ in French Polynesia (Waqavakatoga, 2022). In 2007, the Agreement Establishing the MSG constitution was signed and deposited with the UN in order to secure recognition as a sub-regional organisation.

There was a regional approach to the security crisis in the Bougainville region of PNG that began in 1988 (Regan, 1998). The dialogue leading to the 1990 Endeavour Accord between PNG and Bougainvillian leaders was overseen by Ni-Vanuatu observers, alongside New Zealand and Canadians. In 1994, a South Pacific Peacekeeping Force consisting of Fijian, Tongan, ni-Vanuatu, Australian, and New Zealand personnel was deployed to facilitate a peace conference in Bougainville (Breen, 2016). In 1997 a more broadly-based peace process began, and was monitored first by a Truce Monitoring Group (TMG) consisting of 250 personnel from New Zealand, Vanuatu, Fiji, and Australia, and later by a Peace Monitoring Group (PMG) made-up of personnel from Australia, New Zealand, Fiji, and Vanuatu, as well as a very small United Nations Observer Mission on Bougainville (UNOMB) (Breen, 2016). A 2001 peace agreement led to the creation of the Autonomous Bougainville Government in 2005 and a referendum on the region’s political future was held in December 2019.

‘Small’ and ‘weak’ states in an ‘arc of instability’

The 1987 Fiji coups and Bougainville conflict represented the start of a period during which metropolitan perceptions of the Pacific changed from Cold War anxiety about the potential infiltration of the USSR, to concerns about internal instability and poor governance and service delivery. This perception was consolidated after Fiji faced a civilian coup in 2000.

As in 1987, the PIF did not respond to the 2000 Fiji coup, although the Commonwealth and Africa Caribbean Pacific group had some involvement (Urwin, 2005). However, the coup motivated PIF leaders to adopt the Biketawa Declaration at their 2000 meeting. This declaration provides a mechanism for the PIF to respond to similar crises; it acknowledges the principle of ‘non-interference in the domestic affairs of another member state’, but asserts the need that in a ‘time of crisis or in response to members’ request for assistance, for action to be taken on the basis of all members of the Forum being part of the Pacific Islands extended family’. Consequently, after a military coup in 2006, Fiji became a standing item on the PIF’s agenda, with efforts to engage with Fiji’s interim government.
The security situation in Solomon Islands also declined during the late 1990s. As in Bougainville, a regional effort was mounted to facilitate peace talks, initially comprising police officers from Fiji and Vanuatu. However, in 2000 the Solomon Islands government unsuccessfully requested Australian assistance. After a coup in 2000, a civilian International Peace Monitoring Team (IPMT) consisting of personnel from Australia, New Zealand, Cook Islands, Tonga, and Vanuatu oversaw implementation of the Townsville Peace Agreement between the Solomon Islands parties (Breen, 2016). But the IMPT withdrew in 2002 as it had been unable to influence the political and security situation.

As the security situation continued to decline, in 2003 Solomon Islands Prime Minister Allan Kemakeza invited Australia to lead the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI). Australia was keen to lead RAMSI because it viewed instability as potentially rendering Solomon Islands vulnerable to terrorism or transnational crime in the context of the ‘War on Terror’ (Wainwright, 2003). RAMSI was approved by PIF Foreign Ministers under the Biketawa Declaration. It consisted of police and military personnel, as well as public servants placed as advisers or as ‘in-line’ officials in government departments. By 2005, every member of the PIF was contributing personnel to RAMSI. While questions have been raised about the scope and the sustainability of its work (Fraenkel, Madraiwiwi, & Okole, 2014; Fry & Kabutaulaka, 2008), RAMSI continues to be seen – particularly by Pacific Islanders who took part in it (Putt, Dinnen, Keen, & Batley, 2018) – as a successful example of regional cooperation.

Buoyed by the perceived early successes of the RAMSI, in 2004 Australia undertook a bilateral intervention in PNG. The Enhanced Cooperation Program (ECP) involved the insertion of 230 Australian police advisers into the PNG police, and the secondment of public servants into government agencies. After the constitutionality of arrangements that gave Australian police immunity was successfully challenged, Australia withdrew its officers in 2005.

In 2004 Australia also intervened in Nauru, where the government was struggling to provide basic services, including security. In 2005 the PIF created the Pacific Regional Assistance to Nauru arrangement to expand and regionalise the intervention.

While developments in Bougainville, Fiji, Solomon Islands, and Nauru had serious implications for the security of the people affected by them, many people in other parts of the region (and, indeed, often in rural areas of the affected PICs), lived peacefully. But the ‘failure’ of PICs was interpreted by the metropolitan powers, particularly Australia, as making the
Pacific Islands an ‘arc of instability’ (Dibb, Hale, & Prince, 1999) made up of Australia’s ‘failing neighbour[s]’ (Wainwright, 2003), vulnerable to ‘Africanisation’ (Reilly, 2000). Although these characterisations were critiqued (Chappell, 2005; Fraenkel 2004a; Teaiwa 2006), they influenced Australian policy (Ayson, 2007) and justified an era of ‘new interventionism’ (Dinnen, 2004).

These developments were also used to justify Australia and New Zealand’s efforts to promote enhanced regional integration within the PIF. These efforts culminated in the 2005 ‘Pacific Plan’ (PIF, 2005), which then PIF Secretary General Greg Urwin (2005, p. 19), an Australian, described as ‘a means by which we may address our security-related challenges in a much more comprehensive way’. While Australia and New Zealand favoured economic and market integration (Peebles, 2005; Slatter, 2015), PICs were more cautious, and the Plan was criticised for advocating regional integration initiatives that would cause PICs to ‘gradually relinquish sovereignty over certain areas’ (Huffer, 2006, p. 158), with the Plan was described as ‘hegemonic regionalism’ (Fry, 2004, p. 11).

Consequently, the Pacific Plan failed to gain traction among PICs, with Pacific leaders showing ‘a willingness to engage critically and in their own right with political issues that touch on domestic politics’ (Lawson, 2017, p. 216). A 2013 high-level review of the Plan found that there were tensions between understandings of the key terms ‘regional cooperation’ and ‘regional integration’ (Morauta, Simi, Redley, Bazely, & Poletti, 2013). In 2014 the Plan was replaced by the Framework for Pacific Regionalism (PIF, 2014), which aimed to: provide opportunities for civil society organisations to make submissions to the PIF’s agenda; ensure that regional initiatives have a sound rationale; and to ‘bring back’ the political dimension of regionalism, which many argued had been lost under the technocratic Pacific Plan (PIF, 2014; Dornan & Cain, 2015). In 2018, continuing the ‘trend of greater control of Pacific regionalism by Pacific islanders and, conversely, less control by Australia and New Zealand’ (Fry, 2019, p. 323), PIF leaders agreed to realign the funding model so that 51 percent of assessed funding would come from island member states from 2021. However, Australia and New Zealand continue to provide the bulk of program funding.

‘Crowded and complex’ geopolitics

The Framework for Pacific Regionalism (FPR) endorsed in 2014 signalled greater efforts by PIF island member states to assert control over regionalism and to emphasise the autonomy of the region. The FPR represents Forum leaders’ “renewed emphasis on regionalism” in which
“Regionalism must be inclusive, and relevant to all people across the Pacific” (Taylor, 2017). This renewed approach provided an opportunity for New Caledonia and French Polynesia to join PIF in 2016, despite both being listed as non-self-governing territories by the United Nations Special Committee on Decolonisation. This admission was unprecedented at PIF, since membership had been traditionally reserved for Pacific sovereign and self-governing states (Waqavakatoga, 2022). Though unprecedented, former Secretary General Dame Meg Taylor pointed out there had been no official rule of having to be an independent country to be eligible to join the PIF. However, there are concerns that the admission of New Caledonia and French Polynesia could potentially amplify “the influence of France over regional decision-making since France retains (for now) control over their defense, foreign affairs, justice and monetary policy (so-called regalian powers)” (Tarte, 2018). American Samoa and Guam have also expressed interest in becoming full members of the PIF, however their status as US territories with comparatively less autonomy than the French territories presents hurdles.

In the 2010s, Pacific regionalism reached a point of “potential transformation”, because PICs began to act with “new confidence and independence in foreign and regional affairs”, whilst broadening and diversifying relations with the rest of the world. This transformation is also attributed to “new external players” in the region and “old payers who were newly active” (Firth, 2015). Described by some scholars as the ‘new Pacific diplomacy’ the transformation started around 2009 (Fry & Tarte, Manoa, O’Keefe, Tarai and Tavola, 2015; Waqavakatoga, 2022). It has seen PICs learning to be adept through ‘new thinking’ (assertive, proactive and not be confined to the one region approach) and developing new diplomatic partnerships while simultaneously seeking to capture opportunities offered and created by new geopolitical interests in the region.

This activism has occurred in the context of the stabilisation of internal political and societal challenges within the region. In their place, during the 2010s global great power competition, which had dominated metropolitan interest in the region during the 1970s and 1980s in the context of the Cold War (Fry, 2019), again began to reverberate. By 2018, in the Boe Declaration on Regional Security, PIF leaders acknowledged that the increasingly “crowded and complex” geopolitics of the region may have consequences for regional security. Of most concern, tensions between traditional partners (such as Australia, New Zealand, and the US) on the one hand, and China, on the other (Smith & Wesley-Smith, 2021; Wallis, 2017), has seen PICs “subsumed into a vortex of security contestation of the big powers” (Ratuva, 2019, p. 78).
While an analysis based on simple calculations of military and economic power might assume that PICs have been relatively powerless to resist the machinations of the great powers, this overlooks the ways in which PICs – some more actively than others – have exercised their agency to capitalise on emerging great power interest, just as they had done when managing geopolitical competition during the Cold War (Morgan, 2020) to secure, for example, agreement to the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone.

Since the early 2000s, PICs have expressed a desire to expand their range of diplomatic relationships beyond traditional partners. In the case of Fiji, this desire was given added impetus by the reaction of liberal democracies to the 2006 coup: Fiji’s ‘Look North’ policy led to more active engagements with Russia, Indonesia, India, and China. Indeed, PICs have exhibited “tactical, shrewd and calculating approaches” towards using their political agency to exploit strategic competition between larger powers in pursuit of their own priorities (Ratuva, 2019). For example, with reference to fixing maritime boundaries, then Secretary General of the PIF, Dame Meg Taylor (2020) argued that: “perhaps the time is now right to leverage the geopolitical interests and opportunities that are available to us to advocate for and secure our maritime interests into perpetuity”. PICs have also used the perception of strategic competition to gain greater access to aid, concessional loans, military assistance, and international influence.

Based on their negative perceptions of the ‘arc of instability’ of ‘small’ and ‘weak’ states in the Pacific, the region’s traditional partners, Australia, New Zealand, France, the US, and the UK, as well as Japan, assume that PICs will be vulnerable to the – potentially malign – influence of competing powers (Strating & Wallis, 2022; Wallis, 2021). This has generated concern, as these states, particularly Australia, have long pursued a policy of strategic denial in the region (Herr, 1986). They have been most concerned about China’s growing presence and ambition, which they interpret as threatening. China maintains diplomatic relations with ten Pacific states. It initially sought these relations in the context of competition for diplomatic recognition with Taiwan. Since the early 2000s, China’s interest appears to have taken on a strategic edge. China is engaged in development assistance and lending programs in PICs, including through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China has also funded major infrastructure developments, such as a 360-metre deep-water wharf on the island of Luganville in Vanuatu, which generated concern in Australia after reports that it could be converted into a military base. China was also reported to have attempted to lease the island of Tulagi in Solomon Islands in 2019 to build a deep-water port, after Solomon Islands switched diplomatic recognition from
Taiwan to China in 2019. Kiribati also switched recognition to China in 2019, and China has offered to upgrade airstrips on Kanton, a remote coral atoll in Kiribati that hosted military aircraft during the Second World War. Chinese state-owned enterprises are also extensively engaged in the region’s commercial sector. These developments have fuelled claims that China could engage in ‘debt trap diplomacy’ (Parker & Chefitz, 2018) by instrumentalising its civilian infrastructure projects in the region for military purposes. Although these claims are frequently debunked (Hameiri, 2020; Rajah, Dayant, & Pryke, 2019), they remain influential in metropolitan capitals.

In response, traditional partners have sought to enhance their regional relationships. Since 2018 Australia has been implementing a ‘Pacific step up’ policy, which includes increased aid, infrastructure finance, labour mobility opportunities, defence and security presence and cooperation, and people-to-people links (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2022). Over the same period, New Zealand has engaged in a ‘Pacific reset’ to re-orient it as a Pacific nation and deepen its involvement across diplomatic spheres, defence engagement, policing and economic development (Peters, 2018). In November 2021 New Zealand announced its intention to build on the reset with a ‘Pacific Resilience’ approach (Mahuta, 2021). In 2019 the US made a ‘Pacific Pledge’ to increase its involvement in the region, particularly development assistance (US Department of State, 2019). In 2022 Vice President Kamala Harris addressed the PIF leaders’ meeting, and US President Joe Biden hosted a meeting of 14 Pacific leaders in September 2022 for a US-Pacific Island Country Summit. At that Summit the US’s first-ever ‘Pacific Partnership Strategy’ was announced, accompanied by USAID adopting a specific Pacific Islands Strategic Framework. In 2022 the US also announced that it is partnering with Australia, New Zealand, Japan, the UK, Canada, and Germany in the ‘Partners in the Blue Pacific’ initiative, intended to coordinate these states’ activities in the region. France also sees the Pacific Islands as key to its Une stratégie Indo-Pacifique, under which it seeks to create ‘a security continuum which extends from Djibouti to French Polynesia’ (Guiton, 2019). Since 2018 the UK has been engaged in a ‘Pacific Uplift’ strategy (Clarke, 2019).

While other partners have long been present, their activism has increased over the last decade. Although a long-term aid donor, in 2021 Japan began to explicitly emphasise its ‘Pacific Bond’, with its efforts focused primarily on economic development and human security (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2021). Taiwan has diplomatic relations with Tuvalu, Nauru, RMI, and Palau and provides development assistance, technical assistance, and support for small-scale infrastructure projects. Indonesia presents itself as part of the region by virtue of five
provinces which it characterises as Melanesian (Papua, West Papua, Maluku, North Maluku, and East Nusa Tenggara). The Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi has expressed that “Indonesians and the people in countries of the South Pacific belong to one family” (Marsudi, 2019). In 2019 it convened an Indonesia South Pacific Forum (ISPF) in Jakarta and subsequently announced a ‘Pacific Elevation’ strategy intended to enhance economic engagement, promote greater cooperation on common concerns, and respond to the changing geostrategic environment (Smith M., 2019).

Beyond geopolitical considerations, Indonesia’s pursuit of closer relations with the region is in response to strong support for self-determination aspirations in the two Indonesian provinces of Papua and West Papua (Waqavakatoga, 2022). The United Nations recognises the legitimate authority of Indonesia in these two provinces despite claims of injustice by pro-independence movements regarding how the ‘Act of Free Choice’ of 1969 was conducted. The increased internet penetration for PICs has allowed pro-independence movements like the United Liberation Movement for West Papua (ULMWP) to harness social media to disseminate information on the ‘decolonisation’ plight of West Papuans of which many had little to no knowledge (Waqavakatoga, 2022). As a result of regional public consultation process, the FPR had five framework priorities endorsed by PIF leaders in 2015, with West Papua identified as one priority thematic area. The PIF’s 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent complements the FPR, so West Papua is an issue that will need to be addressed by the PIF in the future.

The increased activism of both traditional and non-traditional partners has generated concern in the region. During the latter years of her term, PIF Secretary General Dame Meg Taylor expressed disquiet about the increasing emphasis by partners on geostrategic competition. In response, she called on Pacific states ‘to maintain our solidarity in the face of those who seek to divide us, particularly through the aggressive pursuit of bilateral relations’ (Taylor, 2018a). Former Samoan Prime Minister Tuilaepa Sailele Malielegaoi (2018) similarly described the focus on competition as a ‘form of strategic manipulation’ because ‘[t]he big powers are doggedly pursuing strategies to widen and extend their reach and inculcating a far reaching sense of insecurity’. Pacific leaders are particularly concerned about the implication that PICs will inevitably have to make a strategic choice: Taylor (2019a) rejected ‘the terms of the dilemma which presents the Pacific with a choice between a China alternative and our traditional partners’.
Geostrategic competition poses several risks to PICs. The most obvious is that it undermines the solidarity on which much successful PIC diplomatic activism, such as on climate change, has relied. A related risk is that it creates divisions within PICs. The decisions of Solomon Islands and Kiribati to switch diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to China have been controversial domestically. In Kiribati, the party that made the switch lost its majority in parliament in the April 2020 general election, after the opposition expressed concern over the apparent secrecy of the decision-making process and alleged that corruption may have been involved (Pala 2020). The switch has been more destabilising in Solomon Islands, where it has become politically divisive, particularly on the island of Malaita. The political rift over the geopolitical divide erupted into three days rioting and looting in Honiara late November 2021 (Wasuka, 2021).

A further risk is that there is a ‘race to the bottom’ in the type of assistance that competing partners provide. There are already suggestions that the rapid increase in aid and infrastructure funding – favoured by China and now becoming an increasing focus of traditional partners – is overwhelming the absorptive capacity of PICs and resulting in poorly coordinated and implemented projects. And there is evidence that aid donated as part of diplomatic competition fuels corruption and violence. For example, in 2001 Taiwan made a US$25m loan to the Solomon Islands government to compensate victims of ethnic conflict. Different groups manipulated the traditional concepts of ‘reciprocity’ and ‘gift-giving’ to extort millions from the government (Fraenkel, 2004b). Competition for compensation provoked further conflict and necessitated the RAMSI.

Another risk is that some of the debt burden deriving from major injections of infrastructure finance, and particularly China’s ‘soft’ loans over the last decade, may be unsustainable. While some loans are used for economically productive projects like improving water supply, roads, education, or tuna canneries, many are spent on projects with little developmental value or economic potential. Of the six PICs that have signed up to BRI, Tonga, Samoa, and Vanuatu are heavily indebted to China (Rajah, Dayant, & Pryke, 2019). In 2019, the debt levels for Samoa, Tonga, and Vanuatu were 30, 40 and 60 per cent of GDP respectively (Rajah, Dayant, & Pryke, 2019). It is unclear whether states like Tonga will ever be able to service these debts, and what political consequences may arise in the future.

Related to this, if foreign investment is not sensitive to the local context it may fuel instability. This was evident in the Australian-initiated Panguna mine in Bougainville and Ok Tedi mine in PNG, both of which had significant social and environmental impacts and eventually
provoked social and political conflict. Some Chinese resource and infrastructure projects reportedly have low labour and environmental standards. Reflecting this, the Ramu mine in PNG experienced riots by workers and local landowners in 2014. US investment has also sometimes had a negative impact: most notably, the ExxonMobil liquefied-natural-gas project in the PNG highlands, which has generated societal conflict and may have contributed to government corruption through the mismanagement of its revenues.

**The ‘large ocean states’ of the ‘Blue Pacific’**

Pacific leaders are aware of these geopolitical challenges. In the Boe Declaration, PIF leaders explicitly stated that they ‘respect and assert the sovereign right of every Member to conduct its national affairs free of external interference and coercion’. An important way that Pacific leaders have sought to use their agency to maintain their autonomy is through the concept of the ‘Blue Pacific’.

The concept of the Blue Pacific was first officially used at the 2017 PIF leaders’ meeting, where it was described as ‘a long-term Forum foreign policy commitment to act as one “Blue Continent”’ (PIF, 2017). The 2019 PIF communiqué then set out ‘Blue Pacific Principles’, that emphasise – among other things – ‘regional priorities’, a ‘partnership approach’ and ‘collective outcomes and impact’ (PIF, 2019a). One key element of the Blue Pacific concept is an identity based around ‘our collective potential and our shared stewardship of the Pacific Ocean’ (Malielegaoi, 2018; Puna, 2019; Taylor, 2019b), which reflects the work of Pacific scholars such as Albert Wendt (1976) and Epeli Hau’ofa (1994; 1998). Another key element of the Blue Pacific narrative is that PICs should move to ‘exercising stronger strategic autonomy’, ‘understanding…the strategic value of our region’ and ‘maintain[ing] our solidarity in the face of those who seek to divide us’ (Taylor, 2018a). Indeed, the Blue Pacific concept crystallised the ‘new Pacific diplomacy’ that had emerged during the 2000s, which saw PICs acting assertively and creatively to pursue their interests (Fry & Tarte, 2015).

While the Blue Pacific concept has been articulated by PIF leaders, there are questions about how Australia and New Zealand – both PIF members – fit within it. Greg Fry (2019, pp 300-301, p.325) has argued that the Blue Pacific concept implies ‘an identity mainly among the island-state membership of the PIF’, because Australia (and New Zealand) are ‘not emotionally part of this regional identity’, due to their, at times, reluctance to take serious domestic policy action to address climate change and emphasis on geostrategic competition. Indeed, when outlining his vision of a ‘sea of islands’, which provided the intellectual roots for the Blue
Pacific concept, Hau’ofa (1998, p. 399) described Australia and New Zealand as ‘domineering, exploitative, and in possession of the gentleness and sensitivity of the proverbial bull in a china shop’.

These questions have also played out on the international stage. At the United Nations PICs traditionally used the PIF to caucus as a ‘Pacific Group’. But after Fiji was suspended from the PIF in 2009 (following its 2006 coup), PICs consolidated into a ‘Pacific Small Island Developing States’ (PSIDS) group separate from Australia and New Zealand (Ratuva, 2019). One of PSIDS early achievements was the UN General Assembly unanimously adopting a resolution on ‘Climate Change and its possible security implications’ in 2009 (Manoa, 2015). In 2011, PSIDS also successfully sought support to change the name of the UN’s regional Asia Group to the “Asia and the Pacific Small Island Development States Group,” or “Asia-Pacific Group”. This name change was historic, as “there has never been any name change within any of the UN’s regional grouping since the regions were divided in 1965” (Komai, 2015). PSIDS also achieved a stand-alone Sustainable Development Goal on oceans and climate change in 2015, and the election of Fiji’s ambassador to the UN in Geneva, Nazhat Shameem Khan, as president of the United Nations Human Rights Council in January 2021.

Reflecting the desire of PICs to exercise more autonomy and to prioritise their interests, the Blue Pacific concept has been accompanied by a move to redefine how security is understood and pursued in the region. In the 2018 Boe Declaration, PIF leaders recognised that the Pacific Islands region is facing ‘an increasingly complex regional security environment driven by multifaceted security challenges’. Accordingly, they articulated an ‘expanded concept of security’ that includes human security, environmental and resource security, transnational crime, and cyber security; underpinned by climate change as ‘the single greatest threat to the livelihoods, security and wellbeing of the peoples of the Pacific’. This reflects the fact that ‘climate change has become the Pacific’s nuclear testing issue of the twenty-first century; it has brought an urgency and emotional commitment to regional collaboration’ (Fry, 2019, p. 281). Just as on the nuclear issue, PICs have cooperated internationally, playing a critically important role at global climate negotiations. Most significantly, PICs played a vital role in helping to achieve a limit on global warming to below 1.5-degrees above the pre-industrial average included in the 2015 Paris Agreement (Morgan, 2021).

In addition to its immediate consequences, climate change is a threat multiplier that intersects with, and exacerbates, other challenges. Most importantly, climate change has increased the frequency and intensity of natural disasters. For example, in 2016 Cyclone Winston caused
over US$100m in damage to crops, affecting food security (Connell & Lowitt, 2020). In 2020 Fiji and Vanuatu experienced simultaneous and converging shocks – Cyclone Harold and COVID-19 – which severely impacted the economy and led to food shortages. While HIV/AIDS and non-communicable diseases (NCDs) have long been prominent, the COVID-19 pandemic challenged health security in the region. The pandemic also generated economic security challenges, with border closures and other restrictions severely undermining Pacific economies, particularly those most reliant on tourism (Wallis & McNeill, 2021).

**Navigating cross-currents in the Blue Pacific**

PICs have therefore entered the third decade of the 21st century facing a range of challenges. But PICs are seeking to navigate these challenges guided by the Blue Pacific concept and with renewed energy around consolidating Pacific regionalism. However, they face cross-currents, including worsening geopolitical competition and the increasing complexity and interrelatedness of security challenges facing the region.

The Boe Declaration represents an important waypoint as PICs navigate these cross-currents. Importantly, it differs from previous regional security declarations because it is accompanied by an Action Plan to guide implementation (PIF, 2019b). This is designed to avoid the criticism that previous declarations were not fully implemented and operationalised. Implementation is also aided by the reinvigoration of the FRSC that had operated until 2015. As part of the reforms introduced during Taylor’s term as PIF Secretary General (2015-2021), the Forum Officials Subcommittee on Regional Security (FSRS) has been created. The FSRS consists of officials and practitioners to ‘develop a Pacific Security Dialogue through the FSRS in order to provide a more inclusive space for regional security discussions’ (PIF, 2019c, p.5). Since 2019 the FSRS has met regularly to discuss security issues and monitor initiatives being taken to address them.

However, implementation of the Boe Declaration is challenging. One question facing PIF officials is how to operationalise the expanded concept of security. For example, human rights, health, and prosperity are critical to human security, but are often considered ‘development’ rather than ‘security’ issues, raising the question of how (and whether) lines should be drawn between them as part of regional security efforts (Wallis, McNeill, Batley, & Powles, Security cooperation in the Pacific: Workshop report, Working Paper 2022/01, 2022b). Then PIF Secretary General Dame Meg Taylor acknowledged this tension, noting ‘the security and
development nexus is well known. There cannot be one without the other…security is an indispensable necessity for sustainable growth and development in our region’ (Taylor, 2018b).

The Boe Declaration Action Plan (PIF, 2019b) also calls for PIF members to develop national security strategies. To date, three have adopted one: Samoa, Vanuatu, and Solomon Islands. PNG had adopted a National Security Policy in 2013.

To implement the Blue Pacific concept and build on the momentum of the Boe Declaration, the 2050 Strategy was adopted by PIF leaders at their 2022 meeting (PIF, 2022b). The 2050 Strategy is a long-term approach that frames regional cooperation and broader action around: political leadership and regionalism; people-centred development; peace and security; resource and economic development; climate change and disasters; ocean and environment; and technology and connectivity (PIF, 2022b). Importantly, the 2050 Strategy has ‘an extremely high level of commitment and ownership from the region’ (Aumua & Middleby, 2022).

The PIF Secretariat is developing an implementation plan for the 2050 Strategy. This process is being accompanied by a comprehensive ‘Review of the Regional Architecture’, to ensure that ‘requisite governance and resourcing arrangements that promote, govern and deepen collective responsibility and accountability to deliver the 2050 Strategy’ are in place (PIF, 2022a). However, regional cooperative mechanisms are complex, and have consequently been characterised as a ‘a patchwork of bilateral, minilateral, and multilateral, formal and informal agencies, agreements, and arrangements, across local, national, regional, and international levels’ (Wallis, McNeill, Batley, & Powles, 2022a, p. 1; 2021), rather than a well-defined and purposeful ‘architecture’. Adding to the challenge is the question of whether there is the appetite and incentives for regional mechanisms to be reformed, including whether partners will provide the funding required (Aumua & Middleby, 2022).

Indeed, this work is also being challenged by questions about the future of Pacific regionalism. While the 2022 PIF leaders’ meeting endorsed the 2050 Strategy, it was characterised by inter-regional tensions, including the withdrawal of Kiribati from the PIF. The immediate cause of these tensions was the failure of the PIF’s five Micronesian members to get their preferred candidate, the Marshall Islands’ ambassador to the US Gerald Zackios, appointed the next PIF Secretary General in 2021. The five Micronesia members had moved to form a voting bloc to advocate for Zackios in 2020, and had warned other members that they would withdraw from the PIF if he was not elected (Carreon 2020). As Zackios was narrowly defeated by Cook Islands’ Henry Puna, the five Micronesian members expressed their collective intent to
withdraw from the PIF. This decision drew on longstanding concerns about Micronesian states and territories being ‘sidelined’ in Pacific Islands’ regionalism, ‘owing largely to geographical distance (and related transportation limitations), but mostly due to historical and political dissimilarities as a result of their historical relations with the US’ (Gallen, 2015, p. 178; Crocombe, 1983).

After extensive regional diplomacy, four of the five Micronesian members agreed to return to the PIF in time for the 2022 leaders’ meeting. Key was the Suva Agreement, which was negotiated between several Pacific leaders in June 2022, and then endorsed by PIF leaders at their July meeting. The Suva Agreement provides that Puna would serve out his term as Secretary General, and in 2024 will be replaced by a Micronesian candidate. The Agreement also provides that leaders of the PIF will rotate between the three sub-regions, and that Micronesia will be given greater regional representation, including a new PIF office in a Micronesian member state and moving the Pacific Ocean Commissioner to Micronesia.

While the Suva Agreement appears to have resolved the threat of a major split within the PIF, the controversy over the appointment of the PIF Secretary General illustrated the role of sub-regionalism running alongside and beneath the PIF and other forms of regional cooperation. Given the diversity of the region, sub-regionalism represents a way in which different states can pursue their differing interests and concerns. However, Steven Ratuva (2021) has warned that, “as long as subregional fragmentation exists in its current institutionalized forms, regionalism as a unifying ideology will continue to be under constant threat”. Indeed, a reoccurring suspicion identified by Macqueen (cited in Lawson, 2013) is ‘that the more conservative Polynesian island states were not sufficiently committed to Pacific-wide regionalism’ and that they seemed rather too willing to shelter under the ‘colonial shadow’ of other institutions. “The negative representation of Melanesians—and darker-skinned people more generally—has, to some extent, been internalized by Pacific Islanders, including Melanesians. This is reflected in the languages, perceptions, and relationships among Pacific Islanders” (Kabutaulaka, 2015).

The MSG is the oldest and most developed sub-regional body. The MSG was institutionalised in 2007, has a secretariat in Port Vila, and its members have agreed to create a free-trade area, a skilled-labour-movement scheme, and a regional security strategy – although none of these initiatives have yet borne fruit. The Polynesian Leaders Group had its first meeting in 2011 and consists of three sovereign states (Samoa, Tonga, and Tuvalu) and five territories (Cook Islands, Niue, American Samoa, French Polynesia, and Tokelau) (Iati, 2017). The Micronesian
Presidents’ Summit (MPS) has met annually since 1994, and a Micronesian Chief Executives Summit (MCES), established in 2003, meets biennially. The MCES includes three independent Micronesian states (Palau, Republic of the Marshall Islands, and the Federated States of Micronesia), as well as the non-sovereign entities of Guam and the Commonwealth of Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI) and the four state governors of the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM): Chuuk, Yap, Pohnpei, and Kosrae. The MPS includes the leaders of five sovereign states, FSM, Palau, Republic of the Marshall Islands, Nauru, and Kiribati. In 2021, MPS leaders committed to formalising its legal status and to establishing a secretariat in Nauru (where interim secretariat services are currently provided). The MPS discusses both non-traditional and traditional security threats (Underwood, 2005; Gallen, 2015), and aspires eventually to develop shared foreign policy objectives under its formal legal status. In October 2020 MPS leaders agreed establish a secretariat in Nauru.

Efforts to bring Kiribati back into the regional fold gained momentum in early 2023, when newly elected Fiji Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka visited Kiribati to apologise to the government and seek Kiribati’s return to the PIF. There are indications that Kiribati President Taneti Maamau will attend a PIF special leaders’ meeting in late February 2023. While Kiribati’s withdrawal from the PIF had been interpreted as illustrating the ongoing risk of splintered regional solidarity, the reasons for Kiribati’s refusal to withdraw were complex, and involved longstanding domestic political machinations and tensions. Kiribati’s closer relationship to China following its 2019 diplomatic switch had also been seen as a factor, although if Kiribati does return to the PIF in 2023 this suggests the China-factor was less influential than initially thought.

China tried to assert itself on the regional level in 2022, with its Foreign Minister Wang Yi touring six states with which China has diplomatic relations (and conducting virtual meetings with the leaders of the remaining states) seeking their agreement to a wide-ranging security and economic pact. This effort was ultimately unsuccessful, with Pacific leaders responding that they would prefer the pact be negotiated within the auspices of the PIF. If Kiribati returns to the PIF in 2023 this will indicate that PICs have chosen to prioritise regional solidarity based around the PIF, over alternatives offered by partners such as China.

But Wang Yi did have some success, getting agreement to more than 50 bilateral development and security related agreements with the states he visited (both in person and virtually) during his tour. But China’s big diplomatic win came in April 2022, when it persuaded Solomon Islands to sign a security agreement. While the final agreement has not been publicly released
(raising questions about democratic accountability), a leaked version was interpreted as potentially opening the door to a Chinese military presence. Solomon Islands Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare has reassured Australia and other concerned metropolitan powers that this is not the case, but his government invited greater policing assistance from China and the possibility remains that Chinese troops could be invited to respond to instability in Solomon Islands. This would represent a watershed moment, as typically traditional partners lead invited stabilisation missions, generating concern both within the region and within its traditional partners.

Another source of regional tension is how to respond to self-determination movements in the region, with the most prominent in the Bougainville region of PNG, New Caledonia, and the Papua and West Papua provinces of Indonesia.

Although Bougainvilleans overwhelmingly voted in favour of independence in 2019, progress on implementation remains slow and any apparent blocking or foot-dragging by the PNG government could lead to tensions. Any possible resumption of conflict in Bougainville would pose questions for other PICs and metropolitan powers about what response they would mount, and how they would negotiate with the PNG government. Similarly, although three referendums in New Caledonia have delivered increasingly narrow victories for those in favour of continued integration in France, questions about the timing and conduct of the third referendum, which was widely boycotted by indigenous Kanak people, have undermined its legitimacy and left Kanak leaders continuing their calls for independence. Again, PICs and metropolitan powers may eventually be pressured to decide how to respond. And, while several PICs are strong supporters of West Papuan self-determination, others are less so: this applies particularly to PNG and Fiji, which have closer relations with Indonesia. Despite this, in October 2020 PIF chair (and Tuvaluan Prime Minister) Kausea Natano wrote to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights seeking support for the PIF’s request to send a human-rights-monitoring mission to West Papua (PIF 2020). Vanuatu remains as the strongest supporter of West Papuan self-determination and has called on the United Nations to investigate human rights violations.

Therefore, as PICs navigate the increasingly choppy cross-currents of 21st century, they do so with energy and purpose, guided by the Blue Pacific concept and the map laid out in the 2050 Strategy which demonstrate their agency and autonomy. While it may be tempting for outside observers to stereotype PICs as ‘small’, ‘weak’, and ‘fragile’, this chapter has demonstrated that – like all states – they face challenges, but they are not passive in their response to them.
References


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3 The PIF establishing the FFA was a contradiction of the PIF’s desire to be the single regional body (Herr 2006), and has initiated the current patchwork architecture we have today.

4 ‘Agreement between Australia and Nauru concerning additional police and other assistance to Nauru’, Melbourne, 10 May 2004.

5 Cook Islands, FSM, Fiji, Kiribati, PNG, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu.


7 This section draws from Wallis 2021.