

Geopolitics of the Pacific Islands: How Should the Pacific Islands States Advance Their Strategic and Security Interests?

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Let me acknowledge the Ngunnawal traditional leaders, past, present and future on whose ancestral land we hold this gathering, to them we pay our respect. I thank the Australian National University (ANU) for giving me the space and support to say something on the Pacific's aspirations to free our people from want and fear and to live in dignity from an international relations perspective.

The timeliness of the workshop is impeccable; foreign policies are being reviewed in the region, a number of Pacific countries are now measuring and weighing their relations guided by their national interests. All this is being done at a time when Australia, under its 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper,¹ is testing out new ideas about strengthening both regional cooperation and integration. Australian outreach to the Pacific has increased. Pacific leaders' visits to Australia and visits by the Australian Prime Minister to the islands have reached new heights. This speaks of Australia's step up in its relations with the Pacific.

With the growing challenges of the Pacific, time is of the essence to meaningfully translate the priorities of the region into action. The youth bulge in the region is a concern. In the case of Solomon Islands, 18,000 youths annually seek jobs, with only 3,000 to 4,000 securing jobs. The fertility of Solomon Islanders is so intense that we have a fast-rising population against declining natural resources; the economy is not keeping pace with the development needs of the region. With the onslaught of climate change, this is creating pockets of poverty and reversing development gains. New health issues and biosecurity threats are now the new normal in the region. We cannot afford to miscalculate our actions going forward; we are probably the last generation able to get it right and we are duty bound to leave a sustainable future for the next generation.

¹ Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *2017 Foreign Policy White Paper* (Canberra: Australian Government, 2017).

As we navigate the Pacific geopolitical landscape today and tomorrow, unpacking and analysing the dynamics and challenges faced by the region, we should do so by asking three basic questions: the “Where”, the “What”, and the “How”. Where is the Pacific in this fast-changing international system? What are the challenges? What does the Pacific need to do to guarantee their people a sustainable future? And finally, the “how” question? How can we unlock and translate the region’s priorities into action with finance, technology and capacity building delivered through country transformative partnerships that will prepare our people to face what is to come?

I am indeed humbled to be amongst friends of the Pacific, all with a wealth of knowledge and interest in the region. I hope this workshop will breathe in old regional problems, and breathe out new solutions. The region needs new thinking about managing its affairs. I also hope the discussion emanating from this workshop will provide a sense of direction for the region to consider as signposts to identify what needs to change to open more doors of opportunities and prosperity. This is possible through honest, open and frank interactive discussions in this workshop.

Changing International System

The shift in the international system with the rise of new emerging powers and the decline of traditional powers has globally redefined engagements in the Pacific. Looking back into history, the United States withdrew from the Pacific soon after the Cold War ended. The United States closed its embassy in Solomon Islands back in 1992, withdrew Peace Corps volunteers, closed the USAID office, and for decades managed its relations with the Pacific from Port Moresby and Suva.

Australia and the Pacific

Australia, in particular, and New Zealand have been left to fill the vacuum created by the United States. Past Australian foreign policy has viewed the Pacific through a security lens, viewing surrounding countries as the “arc of instability”.² The Bougainville conflict from 1988 to 2001, Solomon Islands’ ethnic conflict from 1998 to 2000, and the various coups in Fiji, aided this perception. In other words, Australia looked to Asia to do business and to the Pacific for stability. Australia has successfully managed its international relations globally, enjoying stable economic growth over the last 28 years.

Australian Foreign Policy

Australia’s 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper takes a fresh look at the Pacific; it speaks of Australia’s global interest in having a stable and prosperous Indo-Pacific region, preventing any coercive external influence, not allowing any countries within its neighbourhood to fail, and having strong constructive ties with China, all operating within a “rules-based international order”.³

2 Paul Dibb, David D. Hale and Peter Prince, ‘Asia’s Insecurity’, *Survival*, vol. 41, no. 3 (1999), pp. 5-20.

3 Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *2017 Foreign Policy White Paper*, p. 6.

Regional Cooperation

As we enter the new century, a proliferation of regional organisations has emerged in the Pacific. Regional cooperation outputs have been mixed. Conflict in Solomon Islands has brought forth the best of Pacific diplomacy, the creme de la creme of island solidarity, and the finest regional cooperation emerging with a model of peacekeeping, peacebuilding and peacemaking all rolled into one: the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands. Regional cooperation is only successful when it is country focused. Important lessons have been learnt in dealing with Fiji when the Pacific Islands Forum suspended Fiji's membership, and a new regional institution emerged out of the isolation, the Pacific Islands Development Forum.

China

New geopolitical lines have been drawn with the rise of China; Australia has adopted a "step-up" Pacific policy⁴ and New Zealand has pressed the "Pacific reset" button.⁵ The United States is also re-engaging and considering re-establishing a stronger country presence in the region, a welcome gesture. The frequency of Solomon Islands/US meetings has increased this year. Solomon Islands leaders have been meeting Washington-based representatives from both the State Department and the White House and working on extending the Millennium Challenge Corporation Threshold Programme. Pacific leaders from the Northern Pacific met with US President Donald Trump recently.

Pacific Characteristics

The Pacific has responded, looked within themselves, and formed the Pacific Small Islands Developing States (PSIDS) grouping to champion their collective interests globally. Pacific Island countries have been voting as a bloc, organising themselves to take on global responsibilities, placing PSIDS candidates in selected international positions, and actively participating in global negotiations.

Pacific Island countries have done so by managing their internal dynamics. As the characteristics of the region are so diverse and deep, Islanders know what works and what does not work. Countries of the Pacific are mindful that the outcomes of regional gatherings from climate change to political issues are not necessarily ambitious and based on their internal negotiations.

PSIDS was formed to take stronger and more ambitious positions in global negotiations and to fill in regional gaps. For example, sending Pacific students to Cuba for medical training, as quotas provided in regional institutions are insufficient to meet their respective health challenges. In the case of Solomon Islands, 78 medical students have graduated and almost all are now registered as doctors.

4 Scott Morrison, 'Australia and the Pacific: A New Chapter', Speech, Lavarack Barracks, Townsville, 8 November 2018, <www.pm.gov.au/media/address-australia-and-pacific-new-chapter> [Accessed 19 June 2019].

5 Winston Peters, "'Shifting the Dial", Eyes Wide Open, Pacific Reset', speech, Lowy Institute for International Affairs, Sydney, 1 March 2018, <www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/winston-peters-new-zealand-pacific> [Accessed 19 June 2019].

Having said this, the journey of each and every Pacific Island country is not the same within the international system.

All have varying perspectives shaped by their different development status. Four Pacific countries are classified as least developed countries. Twelve of the eighteen Pacific Islands Forum members are members of the United Nations and belong to the Asia and Pacific Regional Group at UN level. Three other members of the Forum, Australia, New Zealand and France (via French Polynesia and New Caledonia) belong to the Western Europe and Other States Regional Group. Two members of the Forum are on the UN decolonisation list, French Polynesia and New Caledonia. Six Pacific countries have relations with the Republic of China (ROC), and the rest with People's Republic of China (PRC). The ROC-PRC question emerges annually at the post-Forum dialogue meeting, depending on who is hosting the Forum; the venues for ROC and PRC meetings are not necessarily at the same location.

The level of integration also differs amongst PSIDS: Northern Pacific Island countries are integrated with the United States, while Cook Islands and Niue in the south are politically associated with New Zealand. Samoa, Tonga and Fiji have huge diasporas in New Zealand, Australia and the United States.

Regional Cooperation

Nine regional organisations serve the Pacific, making the Pacific one of the most workshopped, heavily consultant-driven regions in the world. All nine organisations competing for attention and resources comes at a huge cost to Pacific countries. We are talking about nine layers of bureaucracy, nine photocopy machines all serving the same Pacific member states. The regional architecture needs to be reformed, and a sub-regional approach may be an option. I am saying this mindful that more than 90 per cent of the Pacific population are located in four Melanesian countries. The smallest member of the Pacific Island Forum, Niue, has a population of 1,600, and the largest member, Papua New Guinea, of more than 8 million. Regional projects emerging from regional institutions are usually too small for larger Pacific countries.

The concept of equity needs to be redefined and the allocation of quotas needs to be proportionate to the population of member states. The Pacific Islands Forum has a classification of 'Small Islands States' but that's about it. Least-developed countries are basically orphans in the region.

Despite Pacific countries being large ocean states and all regional organisations doing something on the ocean, nothing being done is deep enough to make an impact. The ocean is being dealt with in silos and on a piecemeal basis; it is all over the place: the Pacific Ocean Commissioner is the Secretary General of the Pacific Islands Forum; the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme does some assessment of the health of the ocean; the Forum Fisheries Agencies monitors fisheries; the Secretariat of the Pacific Community does work on coastal management and research; and the University of the South Pacific provides education. Investment on extending Pacific sovereignty in terms of supporting Pacific countries' continental shelf claims had to be sought outside of the region. The coastal waters of most of the Pacific countries are not mapped. Pooling of resources to carry out such a task should be the new thinking, to integrate more people

into the mainstream economy. Tourist boats cannot visit provinces which usually make up 80 per cent of our population in the case of Solomon Islands. Matters relating to the ocean should be housed under one roof.

The Pacific Islands, including Solomon Islands, have almost 28,000 square kilometres of exclusive economic zones under the *United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea*. Solomon Islands has a Ministry of Lands, but no Ministry of Ocean. I am pleased to say things are changing nationally. My Ministry now is coordinating all ocean matters of Solomon Islands with twelve other line Ministries. Our vision is to have one national ocean authority going into the future.

We oversold the concept of regionalism, so much so that we have given a free pass to many potential partners who are now avoiding conducting genuine dialogue and cooperation with member states over their regional contribution. During my brief time with my Ministry, I have seen a number of non-resident Ambassadors here in Canberra visiting my capital and spending more time speaking with foreign missions in Honiara than with state institutions. Other partners from the United Nations to the European Union (EU) are all moving out from member states and managing relations from Suva. The EU made the shift out of Honiara last year.

Climate Change

In navigating the sea of change in the Pacific, the *Paris Agreement*, the Sustainable Development Goals and the *Addis Ababa Action Agenda* of the Third International Conference on Financing for Development, all adopted in 2015, are important. All these frameworks are the region's first and last line of defence in guaranteeing their survival.

These frameworks call for global change in the way we do business if we are to avoid having runaway climate change reach the point of no return. This is the Pacific's worst fear, as we are located in the world's climate hot spot, where the impact of climate change is three times the global average. The window is fast closing, ocean acidification has passed safe limits of 350 ppm to now reach 402 ppm in less than ten years. At 550 ppm coral begins to dissolve. Fishing grounds are slowly shifting as the sea becomes warmer. The tourism industry is under threat. Food and water security is now creating pockets of poverty, from fighting a warm war that could easily turn into a hot war as land fertility of relocated populations reduces with population stress and natural disasters. This makes climate change a threat multiplier which is beyond the capacity of countries and the region to tackle.

Sadly, commitments made under the Paris Agreement are so low that we are heading to a 3.7 to 4 degrees increase in global temperatures; a death sentence for the Pacific. The future of the world rests on global cooperation and everyone doing their fair share. If we do not step up on our commitment by 2020, the *Paris Agreement* is dead. The Pacific as we know it may not be saved, humanity is being threatened; we have this one planet and there is no plan B. Cooperation in the Pacific should focus more on mitigation, including on renewable energy, re-forestry and agriculture.

The new frameworks referred to above call for a new political relationship, a new form of partnership and transformative cooperative arrangements. Two goals must be our target in cooperation with Australia.

First, countries in the region need to own their economies, creating homegrown private sectors, to put all Pacific countries on an upper middle-income pathway.

Second, new partnerships have to be big and people-centred and reach out into rural areas. There needs to be a shift from focusing on governance and policies to the core interest of the countries to have a better quality of lives for their people. Infrastructure and renewable energy, in particular, should be placed high on the agenda.

In the case of Solomon Islands, only 20 per cent of the population are connected to the electricity grid. More hydropower generators need to be built; this will allow people to store their traditional crops and shift from slash-and-burn agriculture to commercial agriculture and fish farming. This will help to prepare our people to respond to ocean acidification that will wipe out their livelihood under current trends. Today's Pacific policies must be driven by what science is telling us.

Given the impact of climate change, security as defined by the Pacific Islands covers non-traditional security issues, including food, water and energy security. Building Pacific resilience means unlocking the permanent interests of the region, including economic empowerment, infrastructure, renewable energy and agriculture, more homegrown investments, fisheries and tourism.

Energy alone accounts for a third of many Pacific Island countries' budgets. Doing more on renewable energy frees up domestic funds to develop clean economies. Thinking big must be the new approach, shifting from community-based interventions to national projects. The Coral Sea Cable System and the recent announcement by Australia on A\$250 million of infrastructure development in Solomon Islands are examples of the transformative partnerships we are seeking that will shift our populations from slash-and-burn to commercial agriculture. Other examples include acting on the *Pacific Agreement on Closer Economic Relations (PACER) Plus* with a sense of purpose, putting in place hot-air treatment facilities, fumigation, laboratories and biosecurity mechanisms to help Pacific countries engage in trade. Trade liberalisation also means discussing the question of having in place reciprocal visa arrangements.

Labour mobility remains a priority for Pacific Islands countries. Enhancing that by having Pacific national universities receive Australian university accreditation would help labour mobility, especially for semi-skilled and skilled opportunities. Each year there are 100 nurses trained in Solomon Islands, but only 20 getting jobs nationally; more of our unemployed nurses should be given a path to enter the Australian labour market.

We must learn from the failure of Millennium Development Goals, which were primarily aimed at social outcomes, as compared to the Sustainable Development Goals, which embrace economic, social and environmental pillars. Building a highway of partnership, Pacific countries in recent years have been establishing new relations in an attempt to broaden their cooperation to compliment the dedicated support given by Australia.

Let me wish the workshop every success, May King Solomon's wisdom be with us in our deliberation. God bless the Pacific, God bless Australia.