POWER AND INFLUENCE IN THE PACIFIC ISLANDS

UNDERSTANDING STATECRAFTINESS

Edited by Joanne Wallis, Henrietta McNeill, Michael Rose, and Alan Tidwell

Power and Influence in the Pacific Islands

This book outlines an analytical framework to understand power, influence, and statecraft in the Pacific Islands region. With contributions by scholars from the United States, Australia, China, New Zealand, and across the Pacific Islands region, it provides 'both sides of the story' of statecraft and explores how power and influence are being exercised in the Pacific Islands.

Amid escalating strategic competition, the United States, China, Australia, and a range of other partners are trying to exercise power and influence in their Pacific Islands region through their statecraft. But which partners are doing what, where are they doing it, and how are Pacific Island countries and people responding? Through case studies of key examples – such as economic assistance, defence diplomacy, scholarships, and strategic narratives – this book analyses how tools of statecraft are being deployed by a range of key partners and Pacific Island states, and how they are being received by Pacific Island countries and people.

A vital resource for scholars and practitioners in International Relations and diplomacy as well as those seeking to understand how statecraft, power, and influence are being exercised in the Pacific Islands region.

Joanne Wallis is Professor of International Security and director of the Stretton Institute 'Security in the Pacific Islands' research program at the University of Adelaide, and a Nonresident Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution. She is the author or editor of ten books on security in the Pacific Islands region.

Henrietta McNeill is a Research Fellow in the Department of Pacific Affairs at the Australian National University. She has published in *Political Geography*, *The Contemporary Pacific*, and *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*. She was awarded a 2021 Fulbright New Zealand General Graduate Award.

Michael Rose is an anthropologist and adjunct fellow of the School of Social Sciences at the University of Adelaide.

Alan Tidwell is Professor of Practice and Director of the Center for Australian, New Zealand and Pacific Studies (CANZPS) at the Georgetown University Walsh School of Foreign Service. His areas of interest include Australian-American relations, smaller states of Oceania, and conflict resolution.

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Contributors

Derek Futaiasi was a Pacific Research Fellow in the Department of Politics and International Relations at the University of Adelaide.

Priestley Habru is a PhD scholar in the Department of Politics and International Relations at the University of Adelaide

Quentin Hanich leads the Fisheries Governance Research Program at the Australian National Centre for Ocean Resources and Security (ANCORS) at the University of Wollongong, where he is a Nippon Foundation Ocean Nexus Chair.

Alexander Jun-Li Yeong is an undergraduate student at the University of Adelaide.

Maima Koro is a Pacific Research Fellow in the Department of Politics and International Relations at the University of Adelaide. She was bestowed the Samoan chiefly title of Maualaivao in 2008.

Chloe Le is an undergraduate student at the University of Adelaide.

Epo Mark completed a Master of Education at the University of Adelaide.

Henrietta McNeill is a Research Fellow (Pacific Security, Geopolitics, Regionalism) in the Department of Pacific Affairs at the Australian National University.

Corey O'Dwyer is an Honours student at the University of Adelaide.

Feagaima'ali'i Soti Mapu completed a Bachelor of Philosophy, Politics and Economics at the University of Adelaide.

Michael Rose is an anthropologist and adjunct fellow of the School of Social Sciences at the University of Adelaide.

Nicholas Ross Smith is a Senior Research Fellow at the University of Canterbury's National Centre for Research on Europe, where he is the academic lead of the 'EU in the Indo-Pacific' Jean Monnet Network.

Jim Tawa Biliki completed a Master of Engineering at the University of Adelaide.

Alan Tidwell serves as Professor of the Practice and Director of the Center for Australian, New Zealand and Pacific Studies (CANZPS) at the Georgetown University Walsh School of Foreign Service.

Wilhelmina Utukana completed a Bachelor of Law at the University of Adelaide.

Joanne Wallis is Professor of International Security in the Department of Politics and International Relations and Director of the Stretton Institute 'Security in the Pacific Islands' program at the University of Adelaide. She is also a Nonresident Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution.

William Waqavakatoga is a PhD scholar in the Department of Politics and International Relations at the University of Adelaide.

Geyi Xie is a PhD scholar in the Department of Politics and International Relations at the University of Adelaide.

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1 Understanding and analysing statecraft in the Pacific Islands[1]

Joanne Wallis, Henrietta McNeill, Michael Rose, and Alan Tidwell

Introduction

Pacific Island countries (PICs) and their partner states recognise the 'crowded and complex' geopolitics of the region (Wallis 2017a; Pacific Islands Forum 2018). As a growing number of partner states pursue their geopolitical ambitions, those that have traditionally played a role in the region, such as the United States (US), France, Australia, and New Zealand, are concerned how their interests may be affected by other partner states using tools of statecraft – such as infrastructure projects or developmental aid – to influence, or even coerce, PICs and/or other actors in the region. PICs are also concerned about being dragged into broader strategic competition between China, on the one hand, and the US and its allies and partners, on the other.

While Beijing had signalled interest in the Pacific Islands region since 2006, the April 2018 rumour that China was in talks to build a military base in Vanuatu put partners on high alert. Although these rumours were denied by both governments, they put traditional regional partners, the US, Australia, New Zealand, and France, and others, such as the United Kingdom (UK), Japan, and South Korea, on notice that China's increasingly visible presence in the region may have strategic motivations. This message was reinforced by the 2019 news that Solomon Islands and Kiribati had switched diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to China. China then attempted to lease an island in Solomon Islands that had been home to a Second World War Japanese naval base and offered to upgrade a strategically located airstrip that had hosted military aircraft during the Second World War in Kiribati. The April 2022 news that China and Solomon Islands had entered into a security agreement, which some observers interpreted as potentially paving the way for a Chinese military presence, amplified strategic anxieties in Washington, Canberra, Wellington, and elsewhere (Shoebridge 2022).

China succeeded in persuading Solomon Islands and Kiribati and, in early 2024, Nauru, to switch diplomatic recognition, and in encouraging other PICs to enter a raft of bilateral development, policing, and other cooperative agreements, by substantially increasing the range of tools of statecraft that it deployed in the region from 2006. Of these tools of statecraft, low-interest

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loans and infrastructure projects have been the most prominent, supplemented by aid and security assistance. Less prominent, but potentially highly influential, have been the soft power and strategic narratives that China has deployed to improve its reputation in the region. However, China failed to secure an agreement to its proposed regional security and economic pact in May 2022, signalling that there are limits to its influence and that PICs are willing to push back if their unity becomes compromised.

The US, Australia, and their allies and partners have responded to China's initiatives with alacrity. In 2018, Australia announced its 'Pacific step-up' policy (relabelled as 'Building a stronger and more united Pacific family' following a change of government in May 2022), which has included substantial infrastructure financing, increased security assistance, and developing people-to-people links, aimed at improving its reputation and relationships in the region. This builds on it providing almost half of the region's development assistance. Australia has also deployed the strategic narrative that it is part of a 'Pacific family' to justify its role in the region. The US has similarly increased its efforts. Under President Trump, it made a 'Pacific Pledge' to increase its assistance to the region, and momentum has increased during the Biden administration. President Biden hosted summits with Pacific leaders at the White House in 2022 and 2023 and the US government has adopted its first-ever Pacific strategy. New Zealand established the 'Pacific Reset' policy in 2018 to increase investment and resources in the region in response to China's growing influence (later changed to 'Pacific Resilience') and, alongside deep cultural and diasporic ties, deploys tools of statecraft in ways that seek to demonstrate that it is both 'in and of the Pacific'. The US, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, and the UK (later joined by Germany, Canada, and South Korea) also established the Partners in the Blue Pacific (PBP) initiative in 2022 to better coordinate their assistance.

Despite the increase in interest in the consequences of partner states deploying tools of statecraft in the Pacific Islands region by metropolitan governments, prominent think tanks (Canyon 2022; Grossman et al. 2019; Wallis 2017a; Herr 2019; Keen and Tidwell 2024), and the media (Wallis et al. 2022), the nature and extent of the tools of statecraft that partners are deploying is often poorly understood, and there has not been a comprehensive analysis of which partners are doing what and where in the region. There has also been conceptual fuzziness around terms such as 'power' and 'influence', with the word 'statecraft' becoming an increasingly popular alternative way to describe the actions that partners are taking, particularly in Australia. There has also been little analysis of how PICs and Pacific people are responding to these statecraft efforts: have they generated power and influence in the way that partner states hope and expect? How are PICs undertaking statecraft? This book fills this gap by providing a comprehensive definition of 'statecraft' and outlining an analytical framework to study it, and then applying that framework to empirical examples of statecraftiness from the Pacific Islands region.

This chapter begins by defining statecraft and outlining the component parts of the webs of statecraft that partner states are weaving in the region. It then establishes an analytical framework that we utilise throughout the chapters of the book, and finally provides a roadmap of what is contained in those chapters.

What is statecraft?

It is now common to hear analyses of strategic competition in the Pacific Islands region refer to the 'statecraft' that partners are practising to advance their interests in the region. However, what the term means is often unclear. For some, statecraft refers to the whole foreign policymaking process. For others, it describes the ways that states pursue their foreign policy goals. We adopt a comprehensive definition as:

> *the actions that states take to try to change: (a) their external environment; (b) the policies and/or behaviour of target states, actors, communities, and/or individuals; and/or (c) the beliefs, attitudes, and/or opinions of target states, actors, communities, and/or individuals.*[2]

Our definition echoes elements of the Australian Government's understanding of grey-zone security challenges: 'activities designed to coerce countries in ways that seek to avoid military conflict', including 'exploiting influence, interference operations, and the coercive use of trade and economic levers' (Department of Defence, 2020). But while the government's definition elides coercion and influence, for clarity we differentiate between them.

- We understand *influence* as the indirect exercise of state power to (re)shape targets' beliefs, attitudes, and/or opinions.
- We understand *coercion* as the direct exercise of state power to alter – whether through negative inducements (actual or threatened punishments) or positive inducements (actual or promised rewards) – the target's policies and/or behaviour.

While influence is ostensibly non-coercive, targets may find some influence attempts coercive if they fundamentally challenge their beliefs, attitudes, and/or opinions. Furthermore, influence and coercion often occur simultaneously, either mutually reinforcing or undermining each other.

The tools of statecraft

In this chapter, we present the major tools of statecraft that partner states are deploying in the Pacific Islands. These tools may induce short-term, instrumental changes in behaviour and/or long-term changes to the ideas about, and predispositions towards, the partner state deploying them. They are usually coexistent and interrelated; at times intersecting with or even undermining

one another. For that reason, we characterise the deployment of tools of statecraft in the region as located within a 'web of statecraft' made up of six categories:

- Economic;
- Security and defence;
- Diplomatic;
- Soft power;
- Grey-zone; and
- Black-zone.

On the outside of each web are well-established and well-publicised (observable) economic, security and defence, and diplomatic tools of statecraft. The less tangible tool of statecraft, soft power, sits in the next layer. Deep within the web hides the covert tools: grey-zone activities and black-zone activities (including political assassination and blackmail). While the latter are tools of statecraft, we do not address them in this book as they are not commonly practised in the Pacific Islands region (Figure 1.1).

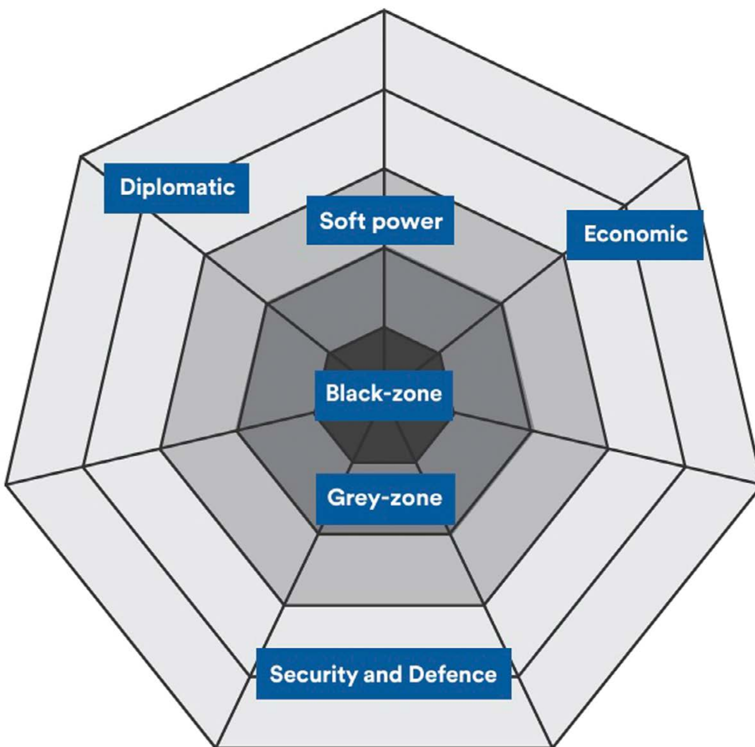

Figure 1.1 The web of statecraft in the Pacific Islands.

Economic

The most common and visible economic tools of statecraft in the Pacific Islands region are:

- Aid;
- Loans;
- Investment; and
- Trade.

Partner states usually begin with positive inducements before resorting to sanctions if positive inducements fail to bring about the desired change in the targets' behaviour. However, positive incentives always imply that negative ones may follow. For example, targets are aware that trade and aid benefits can always be removed.

Development aid is the most used economic tool of statecraft (Lowy Institute 2024), reflecting the relatively low levels of development in many parts of the region. For example, Papua New Guinea (PNG) is ranked 154 (out of 193) on the United Nations Human Development Index, Solomon Islands 156, Vanuatu 140, and Kiribati 137 (UNDP 2024). Aid conditionality, used by Australia and New Zealand between the mid-1980s and early 2000s, influenced several PICs to accept their proposed neoliberal economic and 'good' governance reforms (Wallis 2017b). With the expanded range of donors available today, PICs now have more choices, which consequently reduces the likely influence of any one donor.

Loans are another important economic statecraft tool. China's concessional ('soft') loans for infrastructure projects have triggered claims that it is engaged in 'debt-trap diplomacy' (Parker and Chefitz 2018), whereby it could coerce target states to agree to convert ostensibly civilian infrastructure such as ports for military purposes if the target state can no longer service its loans. Although scholars dispute the existence of debt-trap diplomacy (Jones and Hameiri 2020), as outlined in Chapters 7, 8, and 10, concerns about Chinese loans influence Australia and its partners' geo-economic strategies, including by encouraging them to create (or fund) alternative concessional loan schemes.

Foreign direct investment (FDI) is another tool of economic statecraft, and several partner states have taken steps to promote it. For example, as described in Chapter 8, in 2018, Australia allocated an extra A$1 billion to Export Finance Australia (its national export finance and insurance corporation) to support Australian private sector investment, with a focus on infrastructure. But while FDI can promote development and create a positive opinion of the investor's home state or its developmental and/or political model, it can undermine partner states' reputations when they are associated with particular projects. As discussed in Chapter 4, the Panguna copper mine in the Bougainville region of PNG was operated by

Bougainville Copper Limited, in which Australian company Rio Tinto was a major shareholder. The mine played a major role in instigating conflict that raged in Bougainville during the 1990s. Similarly, the Ok Tedi mine in PNG was operated by Australian mining company Broken Hill Proprietary Company Limited and has caused environmental damage and population displacement.

Trade is a tool of economic statecraft, constituting either an attractive inducement when offering PICs concessional – or unrestricted – access to partner states' domestic markets, or a sanction when taking the form of import restrictions. Indeed, free trade agreements have become a battleground between partner states, with Australia and New Zealand at times concerned that they were being excluded from cooperative mechanisms between PICs. For example, as a compromise to PICs agreeing to the *Pacific Island Countries Trade Agreement* in 2001, Australia and New Zealand were included in the *Pacific Agreement on Closer Economic Relations (PACER)*. After the European Union began negotiating with PICs to create Economic Partnership Agreements (which ultimately only PNG, Fiji, Solomon Islands, and Samoa joined), Australia and New Zealand pushed for similar market access under the *PACER Plus* agreement. Negotiations on *PACER Plus* proved challenging, with a final agreement only entering into force in 2020. PNG and Fiji, the region's two largest economies, opted out of the deal.

A source of tension in many trade negotiations has been access to labour markets for Pacific workers. This highlights the role of labour mobility programmes, and even permanent migration, as tools of economic statecraft to influence the opinions of PICs and Pacific people, as discussed in Chapter 4. Both New Zealand and Australia have developed labour mobility programmes with specific visas attached. In addition, passport holders from the three countries in free association with the US – the Republic of Marshall Islands (RMI), Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), and the Republic of Palau – have access to the US, including for work, as do those from states in free association with New Zealand – Niue and Cook Islands. While labour mobility offers higher wages and improved remittances, it can hollow out PICs' labour markets, contribute to a 'brain drain', and even exploitative labour practices. For example, the RMI saw a 20 percent drop in population between 2011 and 2021 (Johnson 2022).

Another source of tension is regulatory standards, with the export market for kava a prominent example. Kava is grown widely in PICs, and there is potential to develop substantial export markets. Until recently, Australia restricted kava imports due to concerns about its health effects – banning the import of kava almost entirely in 2007. After PICs deployed tools of statecraft to lobby Australia, and Australia recognised the attractiveness of offering market access, in 2019 it increased the quantity of kava that could be brought into Australia for personal use, and in 2021 it introduced a scheme for commercial kava importation (see Chapter 2).

Security and defence

Security and defence-related tools of statecraft commonly deployed in the Pacific Islands region include:

- Assistance aimed to build the capacity (both materiel and human capability) of Pacific Island states' defence, police, and other security agencies;
- Defence diplomacy, such as military exercises and port visits;
- Security cooperation between partners, PICs, and/or regional organisations (Wallis et al. 2021); and
- Crisis response, including humanitarian and disaster relief (HADR) and stabilisation operations.

As discussed in Chapter 5, Australia has long been the partner state with the most significant involvement in security and defence in the southern parts of the Pacific Islands region, with the US playing a major role in the northern Pacific through its territories and freely associated states.

Security and defence tools of statecraft can influence target states and actors by creating a positive opinion of their donors. For example, as discussed in Chapter 5, Australia's Pacific Maritime Security Programme, which provides patrol boats, aerial surveillance, training, assistance, and sustainment to help PICs protect their massive maritime territories, is generally seen positively by PICs, as is Australia's support for the multilateral Forum Fisheries Agency, which coordinates regional fisheries management.

However, security and defence tools of statecraft can also be coercive when they force target states and actors to change their behaviour. For example, the US's military base in RMI constrains RMI's foreign policy choices.

Concern has also been expressed that the 2022 security agreement between Solomon Islands and China could allow China to coerce Solomon Islands, by creating a mechanism for Chinese military or police deployment to Solomon Islands. Numerous states used their webs of statecraft to try to discourage Solomon Islands from concluding the deal, and China has responded in kind. For example, just two days after Australia donated semi-automatic rifles and vehicles to the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force, China countered with a donation of water cannon trucks, motorcycles, and cars (Dziedzic and Wasuka 2022).

Similar competitive dynamics have become prominent with respect to HADR. For example, after the January 2022 Tongan volcanic eruption and tsunami, partner states offered considerable HADR. The Australian-led International Coordination Cell organised much of this assistance, but China operated outside that mechanism. With Tonga's borders closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, most assistance was contactless. This meant that the different partner states did not come into direct contact, which reduced the likelihood of friction between them. However, competitive and poorly coordinated HADR is a possibility in the future.

Diplomatic

Diplomatic tools of statecraft include:

- Diplomatic presence;
- Official visits by state leaders and officials;
- Participation in multilateral and minilateral mechanisms; and
- Sanctions.

Partner states have indicated that they see diplomatic presence as an important tool of statecraft in the region. Since 2018, Australia has worked to become the only state with diplomatic representation in every member of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), although New Zealand is also highly represented. The US has similarly committed to expand its presence in Fiji, and open diplomatic posts in Solomon Islands, Tonga, Kiribati, and Vanuatu, as has the UK in Tonga, Samoa, and Vanuatu. Having persuaded Solomon Islands and Kiribati to derecognise Taiwan in 2019, China established a substantial diplomatic presence in both.

Furthermore, partner states have indicated that they see multilateralism as a valuable tool of statecraft. Australia and New Zealand jealously guard their membership of the region's most significant multilateral institution focused on politics and security, the PIF. And other states keenly seek to engage with the PIF as dialogue partners. US Vice President Kamala Harris secured an invitation to give a virtual address to PIF leaders at their 2022 meeting. This diplomatic win came about even though leaders had decided not to hold their customary PIF Dialogue Partner mechanism, due to fears that it might distract from the important tasks of repairing regional relationships and agreeing to the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent (the 2050 Strategy) (Dziedzic 2022).

Partner states are also increasingly seeking to create minilateral mechanisms to advance their reputations and roles outside existing Pacific-led fora. For example, as noted above, the US, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, and the UK announced the PBP initiative in July 2022 (later adding Canada, Germany, and South Korea). The initiative is intended to enhance donor coordination with PICs. However, it remains to be seen whether mechanisms such as the PBP, which does not include PICs and may potentially sideline regional institutions such as the PIF, will influence PICs to have a positive opinion of partner states. For example, questions have been raised about whether their membership of the PBP initiative means that Australia and New Zealand see themselves as members of the PIF 'Forum family', or merely as 'partners' to the region.

Individual partner states also try to establish region-wide agreements, with China (unsuccessfully) seeking agreement to a proposed regional economic and security pact in April 2022. The US has had more success, hosting a meeting of PIC leaders with President Joe Biden at the White House in September 2022, and achieving agreement to a Declaration on US-Pacific Partnership largely built on the 2050 Strategy (White House 2022).

Not all diplomatic tools of statecraft are positive; some are negative, with sanctions a clear example. For example, Australia, New Zealand, and the US implemented a raft of sanctions against the Fijian regimes that were involved in the 2000 and 2006 coups. Sanctions included suspending military cooperation, terminating certain aid, suspending some elements of government cooperation, and travel restrictions on senior members of the Fijian Government, military personnel, and others involved in the coups. In 2009, Australia led a successful push to suspend Fiji from the PIF and the Commonwealth.

But while sanctions are intended to coerce the target state to change its behaviour, they are not necessarily successful and can have unintended consequences. For example, Australia, New Zealand, and the US arguably maintained sanctions against the Fijian Government for too long after the 2006 coup. In 2009, the Fijian Government expelled the Australian High Commissioner, reducing Australia's high-level diplomatic presence. Rather than returning to democracy quickly, Fijian Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama sought closer relations with alternative partners guided by a 'Look North' foreign policy, including China and Russia. These developments led to the conclusion that Australia was 'close to exhausting its diplomatic options on Fiji to little apparent effect' (Kerr quoted in Dorling 2010). Democratic elections were held again in Fiji in 2014 only after the coup leaders had changed the political system to ensure they would be elected – which they were.

Soft power

Soft power has been defined as 'the ability to affect others by attraction and persuasion rather than just coercion and payment' (Nye 2004). This wide interpretation reflects our definition of influence, and arguably encompasses many of the economic, security and defence, and diplomatic statecraft tools we have identified.

Here, we interpret soft power more narrowly as the intentional deployment of mostly non-material resources to influence recipient states, actors, or individuals to develop positive beliefs, attitudes, and/or opinions about the partner state, or the partner state's worldview. Therefore, we identify common tools of soft power statecraft as including:

- People-to-people links, through cultural, sporting, education, and church linkages;
- Governance programmes, training, and exchanges;
- Media distribution; and
- Strategic narratives.

People-to-people links have attracted growing attention as a tool of statecraft. Indeed, as part of its Pacific step-up since 2018, Australia has explicitly aimed to build linkages through cultural, sporting, education, and church partnerships. New Zealand already has relatively strong people-to-people

links, primarily in Polynesia, because of its large Pacific diaspora, which also facilitates media and sporting linkages. Beyond its links to its Pacific territories and freely associated states, in years past the US Peace Corps sent many volunteers to the region.[3] After a decade-long decline, the US has committed to renewing its Peace Corps deployments. New Zealand and Australia also have state-sponsored volunteer programmes in the region, which continued to do e-volunteering during the COVID-19 border closures and have since renewed their enthusiasm for in-country volunteering.

Governance programmes are another frequently used tool of statecraft, particularly by Australia and New Zealand between the late 1980s and early 2000s. The placement of Australian and New Zealand public servants and police in management positions in Pacific civil services not only influenced (and in some cases, arguably coerced, when these changes were conditional on aid) governance reforms in several PICs, but were also seen to have the benefit of developing relationships between Australians, New Zealanders, and their Pacific counterparts. However, this was not always the case – as resentment about the much more generous pay and conditions that Australians and New Zealanders received, as well as their attitude to local socio-political practices, frequently generated tensions, as discussed in Chapter 4.

Training, capacity-building, and exchanges have also been implemented frequently over the last several decades, particularly in Australia and New Zealand. Countless Pacific officials, police, and defence force personnel have attended Australia- or New Zealand-run training courses, or engaged in exchanges with their Australian and New Zealand counterparts. Strong relationships developed through training have built trust between PIC government agencies and Australian and New Zealand officials, leading to diplomatic gains. The US and other partner states are looking to expand their role in this space.

As discussed in Chapter 3, scholarships are also seen as an important soft power tool, as educating Pacific people may facilitate their acceptance of the key norms and values of partner states offering educational opportunities. For example, through the Australia Awards Pacific Scholarships programme, Australia has assisted thousands of Pacific people to study at Australian and regional tertiary institutions. The September 2022 Declaration on US–Pacific Partnership announced American support for education, training, youth development, and exchange opportunities. Similarly, there are large numbers of Pacific Islanders now studying in China (Zhang and Marinaccio 2019).

Media broadcasts and publications are another key soft power statecraft tool. As Martyn Namorong, a prominent PNG blogger, has commented: ‘For many rural kids like myself, Radio Australia was a link to a wide world beyond the treelines’ (quoted in Flitton 2014).

This reflects that Australia and New Zealand have long been active in the media space, with Australia broadcasting Radio Australia and the Australia Network television service in the region, and New Zealand broadcasting RNZ, Pasifika TV, and providing access to New Zealand news programmes. Following budget cuts between 2014 and 2016, Australian television and shortwave

services were cut, and replaced with an FM service and webstream. This was despite shortwave services providing a vital emergency service during natural disasters, particularly in places where there was limited internet access and no access to an FM radio signal. China recognised the value of broadcasting as a soft power tool, and quickly signed a deal to broadcast TV news in Vanuatu. It has also taken up many of the shortwave radio frequencies that Australia abandoned and has established Chinese newspapers in many PICs. Recognising that it has lost access to an important soft power tool of statecraft, Australia has reinvested in its Pacific media presence since a change of government in May 2022.

Media broadcasting links to our final element of soft power tools of statecraft: strategic narratives. Strategic narratives are 'a means for political actors to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international politics to shape the behaviour of domestic and international actors' (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle 2013, p. 2). If leaders can get their target states (and other actors) to 'buy into' their strategic narrative, this can 'shape their interests, their identity, and their understanding of how international relations work and where it is heading' (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin & Roselle 2013). Therefore, strategic narratives can be attractive tools of statecraft because they can produce 'a narrative context in which certain constructions of actors, their identities, and by extension their interests, come to be taken for granted' (Hagström and Gustafsson 2019, p. 319). Strategic narratives are most likely to succeed in securing 'buy-in' by their targets when they 'convince another country's policymakers that the material benefits will outweigh the costs, and that participation would not undermine the narratives and behaviors through which they maintain their country's sense of "who they are"' (Colley and van Noort 2022, pp. 4–5; Ringsmose and Borgesen 2011). Strategic narratives fall into three categories: first, 'international system narratives' that 'describe how the world is structured, who the players are, and how the system works'; second, 'identity narratives' that 'set out what the story of a political actor is, what values it has, and what goals it has'; and third, 'policy narratives that set out why a policy is needed and (normatively) desirable, and how it will be successfully implemented or accomplished' (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle 2017). The use of strategic narratives is examined in detail in Chapters 6, 12, and 13.

Partner states have recently deployed a series of strategic narratives in the Pacific Islands. Since 2018, Australia has adopted the narrative of 'Pacific family'. New Zealand has long framed itself as a 'Pacific nation' that shares a 'Pacific identity' with the region based on its geography and demography. And, for the last two decades, China has promoted a strategic narrative of 'South-South cooperation', to frame itself as a fellow developing country that shares experiences and interests with PICs. Both Indonesia and France have created strategic narratives built on their Pacific territories as necessarily making them part of the region. All have been criticised when their actions contradict these strategic narratives.

PICs have also deployed strategic narratives. The PIF's 'Blue Pacific' narrative, which was first formally articulated in the 2018 Boe Declaration on Regional Security, and recently reinforced with the adoption of the 2050 Strategy, seeks to influence partner states to recognise and respect the agency and autonomy of PICs, as well as the value they place on regionalism. These efforts have been successful, with partner states frequently adopting the term 'Blue Pacific' in their official discourse, and increasingly in the nomenclature of their activities, including the PBP initiative, as discussed in Chapter 6. However, the latter example highlights how strategic narratives can be instrumentalised, with partner states arguably appropriating the Blue Pacific terminology to attempt to make their initiative appealing to the region, but in fact potentially undermining the intent of the Blue Pacific narrative by sidelining regional mechanisms.

Grey-zone activities

Strategic narratives are increasingly promoted in the information (or cyber) domain, which is the focus of our final category of statecraft tool: grey-zone activities. While, as we note above, the Australian Government defines grey-zone activities broadly, in this paper we will focus on efforts to manipulate the information domain, including disinformation, intelligence, and espionage.

The information domain is increasingly the site of the deployment of disinformation campaigns whereby misleading information is used to benefit the source at the expense of the target. While disinformation campaigns are not new – front organisations, agent provocateurs, leafleting, forgeries, and propaganda have been around, in some cases, for millennia – technology has lowered the barriers to entry and facilitated their speed and spread in the information domain. Disinformation campaigns succeed when effectively exploiting prejudices, heuristics, and lived experiences and can affect voting intentions (Bergstrom and Bak-Coleman 2019). Disinformation campaigns may attempt to influence mass publics or may target certain political or social groups, including the diaspora of the disinforming state. For example, there has been an unsophisticated but coordinated online disinformation campaign regarding West Papua by Indonesia (McRae et al. 2022), and similar disinformation relating to the 2024 New Caledonia riots by Azerbaijan (see Chapter 11).

While physical infrastructure often complicates access to the information domain in the Pacific Islands region, mobile technology has improved access and facilitated the spread of disinformation (Watson et al. 2017). For example, disinformation about the safety of COVID-19 vaccines provided by certain partner states was rife across the Pacific Islands, particularly in PNG. A similar sentiment played out before the COVID-19 pandemic when non-state actors advocated vaccine hesitancy after a malpractice incident in Samoa, which contributed to a measles epidemic.

Indeed, ostensibly fearing disinformation, the Solomon Islands Government temporarily banned Facebook – a major online forum for public political

debate and information sharing in the region – in 2020. Some commentators speculated that Chinese authorities influenced this decision, which coincided with the controversial switch of diplomatic recognition to China (Wickham and Doherty 2020).

Intelligence and espionage are black-zone tools of statecraft that partner states have deployed across the Pacific Islands. Although by its nature opaque and secretive, a glimpse of the kind of activities in which partner states may be engaged was provided by the scandal surrounding allegations that the Australian Government spied on the Timor-Leste Government to affect the outcome of negotiations over the split of oil and gas reserves in the Timor Gap (McGrath 2017; Knaus 2019). Similarly, the Wikileaks scandal exposed the fact that New Zealand had been spying on Tuvalu, Nauru, Kiribati, Fiji, Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, New Caledonia, and French Polynesia to share intelligence with Five Eyes partners (Manhire 2015). The 2023 revelations by FSM President David Panuelo of 'political warfare'—that he had been tailed by Chinese operatives and Micronesian officials had been bribed- certainly indicate that grey-zone activities are not exempt from the region (Doherty and Lyons 2023).

Analytical framework

Identifying the main categories of tools of statecraft being deployed in the Pacific Islands region provides the starting point for our analytical framework that can be applied to understand statecraft, power, and influence in the region.

The first element of our analytical framework points to the fact that statecraft tools cannot be analysed individually. While we have presented the main categories of statecraft tools sequentially, our characterisation of the webs of statecraft that partner states are weaving in the Pacific Islands is intended to capture the fact that these tools (whether attempting influence or coercion) interrelate; at times reinforcing, intersecting with, or undermining one another. The webs of statecraft being woven by individual states can also reinforce, intersect with, or undermine those of other partner states.

Indeed, the deployment of tools of statecraft must be analysed in relative, rather than absolute, terms. It is easy to draw incorrect – at times, alarming – conclusions when one partner's activities are considered in isolation from others. But when partner states' activities are analysed in comparison to each other, a more accurate picture emerges. For example, there were concerns that the 2022 security agreement between China and Solomon Islands had paved the way for the presence of Chinese police (Dziedzic and Wasuka 2022). This encouraged a bidding war: after China provided policy training, Australia donated rifles and police vehicles, to which China responded by donating water cannons, motorbikes and vehicles. But when China's activities are compared to the ongoing and broad-reaching policing assistance provided by Australia and New Zealand (Wallis and Rose 2024), it suggests that there may be less cause for alarm about their potential implications for the strategic interests of the US and its allies and partners.

Our characterisation of the web of statecraft is also intended to reflect the second element of our analytical framework: that statecraft tools, particularly those that seek to influence, rather than to directly coerce, frequently have primary, secondary, and even tertiary goals and targets. For example, a state may use a tool of statecraft to coerce a primary target state to change its behaviour, but with the intention (or hope) that this also influences secondary target states, which perhaps change their beliefs based on the behaviour of the primary target. This may be the case with respect to some of China's activities in the region, with suggestions that, while the Solomon Islands Government is the primary target of the Solomon Islands-China security agreement, the secondary targets may be Australia, New Zealand, and the US, all of whom feel threatened by the potential for a Chinese military presence in the region. By sending a warning to them about its potential military role in the Pacific Islands, China may be seeking to change their behaviour in its areas of direct strategic interest, such as the East and South China Seas.

The third element of our analytical framework draws attention to the fact that states attempting to deploy tools of statecraft may themselves become caught in their own web if their actions have unintended or unanticipated consequences. A state may use a tool of statecraft to influence or coerce a target state to change its policy – such as its diplomatic recognition – but then become dependent on that target state to maintain that policy. For example, Taiwan relies on diplomatic recognition by a diminishing number of PICs. In Solomon Islands, the Malaita provincial government has used Taiwan's interests to further its struggle for power and resources.[4]

Indeed, target states and actors in the Pacific Islands region are not necessarily being trapped in the webs that external powers are weaving, and some have instrumentalised them for their own domestic and/or international gain (Fry and Tarte 2015). Many PICs and Pacific actors themselves weave influence or coerce external states in the pursuit of their own interests, as discussed in Chapters 2 and 6. The success of PICs in influencing Australia and the US to take serious action to address climate change is an example. Their success in encouraging partner countries to adopt the 'Blue Pacific' narrative is another example and is considered in detail in Chapter 6.

The fourth element of our analytical framework is the observation that there is not necessarily a neat causal relationship between a partner state deploying a range of tools of statecraft in the region, and its influencing or coercing a target PIC, or Pacific actors, communities, and/or individuals. If there was such a relationship, then Australia – by far the largest aid donor and with the most extensive security, development, and diplomatic presence – should have been able to influence the Solomon Islands Government not to sign its security agreement with China. Indeed, the correlation between, for example, the deployment of tools of statecraft by a partner state and a change in the policies and/or behaviour of a Pacific Island country, does not necessarily mean that one caused the other. The deployment of statecraft tools does not generate unilinear effects. Whether attempts to influence partner states are successful is ultimately determined by the receptivity of PICs.

This highlights the fifth element of our analytical framework: that the exercise of power is always relational, rather than unilateral or passively received. While much commentary on China's web of statecraft has assumed that PICs and other Pacific actors are 'passive dupes' (Powles, Wallis and Newton Cain 2018), China's attempts to influence or coerce – and those of all partner states – are mediated by their targets, which each possess agency and operate within unique political structures and socio-political cultures.

The sixth element of our analytical framework highlights that the quantity of statecraft tools being deployed by a partner state does not necessarily equate to the quality or effectiveness of those tools of statecraft. Indeed, an overemphasis on quantity by partner states keen to be seen to be 'doing something' in response to China's activism has meant that funding has increasingly been targeted at 'big ticket' infrastructure projects that are perceived to have high public relations value. This has meant that small-scale programmes run by civil society groups that are perceived as having less public relations value, are not (or no longer) receiving funding from traditional partners, even for inexpensive items like chairs, tables, and computers to assist vulnerable communities (McNeill 2024). It has also raised questions about debt sustainability, most recently in respect of the rapid increase in Australian lending to the region (Dayant et al. 2023).

Relatedly, the seventh element of our analytical framework highlights the importance of analysing statecraft over the long, rather than short, term. This was illustrated by how the US responded to the 2022 Solomon Islands-China security agreement. After the agreement was signed, the US immediately sent senior diplomatic officials to Solomon Islands, despite not having had a diplomatic presence there for 29 years (McNeill and Wallis 2023). The US's long absence from Solomon Islands undermined the value of these diplomatic visits. As Futaiasi, Habru, Koro, Waqavakatoga, and McNeill argue in Chapter 2, it is the 'quality of relationships determines outcomes far more so than might and money in the Pacific', with those quality relationships built up over time. Individuals can generate this influence, as demonstrated in Chapter 3.

Finally, while for analytical simplicity we focus on the tools of statecraft being deployed by partner states, national governments are not the only ones pursuing statecraft. For example, China acts not only through its central ministries, but through a variety of other actors, ranging from provincial authorities, to state-owned enterprises, to ostensibly private associations, and even individuals. And this also applies to PICs and other Pacific actors, who range from the regional, national, sub-national, community, and individual levels. Focusing only on what national governments do omits this complex web of authority and influence.

Chapter outline

The remainder of this book applies this analytical framework to analyse case studies of the deployment of statecraft in the Pacific Islands region.

Chapter 2, by Derek Futaiasi, Priestley Habru, Maima Koro, William Waqavakatoga, and Henrietta McNeill, focuses on how PICs practice statecraft.

It argues that, in the Pacific Islands region, influence is not necessarily based on financial or security resources. Instead, quality relationships are the enduring currency of influence. As Pacific societies are communally structured, their tools of statecraft are drawn from this collaborative existence – often bringing together states and using forms of cultural diplomacy to achieve outcomes. This chapter examines how, as a group, PICs leverage these mechanisms to their advantage within an increasingly contentious geopolitical environment. PICs are particularly effective at using diplomatic tools of statecraft to influence partner states, and one another.

Chapter 3, by Priestley Habru, Wilhelmina Utukana, Feagaima'ali'i Soti Mapu, Jim Tawa Biliki, and Epo Mark, focuses on a specific tool of statecraft: scholarships. In this chapter, the authors, all of whom are or were scholarship students from the Pacific Islands region, analyse scholarships as a tool of statecraft. They describe how scholarships have increasingly come to be seen as a key element of 'soft power' because of their capacity to develop people-to-people connections between their recipients and populations of their donor country. They then describe their reasons for applying for scholarships to study in Australia, their experiences of holding scholarships and studying in Australia, and how these experiences have shaped their opinion of Australia (and Australians). They conclude by arguing that, while their scholarships have improved their perception of Australia, and consequently have been an effective tool of Australian soft power, their experiences in Australia have not been unproblematic, and they therefore make recommendations for how scholarships could become more effective tools of statecraft.

In Chapter 4, Henrietta McNeill and Maima Koro focus on another specific range of tools of statecraft: economic tools. This chapter explores the challenges that maintaining the colonial legacy poses in Australia's economic statecraft with the Pacific Islands region, and suggests areas to modernise and optimise the opportunities within the relationship. It argues that historical characterisations of the Pacific Islands region as a source of labour have meant that Australia has never established the diplomatic and economic tools of statecraft used in other engagements, such as two-way trade. The extraction of resources from the region, whether people or material, appears transactional– with Australia often oblivious (or perhaps ignorant) to the agency of Pacific Islanders, and the non-fiscal value that comes from international relationships. This chapter examines three key issues of economic statecraft: migration, trade, and aid, examining how colonial legacy thinking is embedded and hinders the effective deployment of statecraft.

Chapter 5, by Joanne Wallis, Quentin Hanich, Michael Rose, and Alan Tidwell, continues the focus on specific tools of statecraft, by analysing defence diplomacy. While diplomacy has traditionally been understood as the role of civilian diplomats, defence diplomacy involves the peaceful use of defence resources to pursue foreign and strategic policy objectives. Therefore, defence diplomacy does not include offensive military operations, but it can involve ones for peaceful purposes, such as HADR. But defence diplomacy is

often not well understood, partly because diplomacy is commonly seen only as the domain of civilian diplomats, and partly because there is scepticism about its value. This chapter assesses the nature and effectiveness of defence diplomacy in the Pacific Islands region, with a focus on Australia and the US, which have long been active partner states. It analyses the following different elements of defence diplomacy: defence cooperation and assistance; maritime surveillance and support; people-to-people links; HADR; and minilateral and bilateral arrangements. It concludes by arguing that, while defence diplomacy can be an effective tool of statecraft, more needs to be done to emphasise partnership with PICs and to support continued localisation.

Chapter 6, by Joanne Wallis, Maima Koro, and Corey O'Dwyer, turns to the final specific tool of statecraft analysed in this book: strategic narratives. The developing literature on strategic narratives as tools of statecraft has analysed their attempted use by great powers, particularly China, to influence less materially powerful states. This chapter switches focus to analyse how PICs, which are less materially powerful, have created and deployed their own strategic narratives. It does this by analysing the Blue Pacific narrative adopted and deployed by PICs to seek to influence their more materially powerful partners. It analyses the discourse and policies of partner states and international institutions and argues that they have, at times, been influenced by this narrative to both change their own narratives, and, more significantly, their substantive policies. While it acknowledges that partner states have appropriated the Blue Pacific narrative in their own attempts to influence PICs, it concludes by arguing that the Blue Pacific narrative demonstrates how less materially powerful states can leverage geopolitical competition so that their strategic narratives can influence more materially powerful partners to advance their interests and priorities.

In Chapter 7, Alan Tidwell and Joanne Wallis analyse the first country case study, that of the US. In the context of its broader strategic competition with China, over the last five years the US has considerably increased its focus on the Pacific Islands region. This chapter outlines the contours of the US's statecraft in the region since 2018, and argues that it has consisted of the deployment of tools statecraft in the diplomatic, developmental, and military realms. It concludes by arguing that, while the US has made a significant number of diplomatic gestures and has announced a range of substantial spending programmes in the region, implementation of these announcements has been poor, primarily because domestic political divisions have delayed their passage through Congress. Therefore, while Pacific leaders have welcomed the US's re-engagement, the window for its statecraft to successfully build its reputation and relationships remains tight.

Chapter 8 follows with Joanne Wallis analysing the statecraft of the partner state that has long played the most active role in the region: Australia. For decades, Australia has provided almost half of all aid to the region, led numerous HADR responses, and conducted a series of interventions in response to instability. Yet since 2018, Australia has made determined efforts to increase

its statecraft in the region, through its ‘Pacific step-up’ policy. This reflects Australia’s growing anxiety about the strategic consequences of China’s increasingly visible presence in a region that lies across some of its most important air and sea lanes of communication. This chapter outlines the nature of Australia’s contemporary Pacific policy, which includes the deployment both of material tools of statecraft, such as infrastructure financing, security assistance, and aid, and ideational tools, particularly its adoption of the ‘Pacific family’ strategic narrative to justify its role and relationships in the region.

In Chapter 9, Henrietta McNeill focuses on a case study of New Zealand, which has long described itself as a Pacific nation, one that is not just geographically ‘in’ the region, but also culturally ‘of’ the region. With a large Pasifika diaspora and Polynesian connections with New Zealand’s tangata whenua (Indigenous Māori people), New Zealand’s statecraft in the region differs significantly from that of Australia and the United States. This chapter explores the ways in which these connections are sought and maintained through historical and constitutional mechanisms, migration and diaspora, indigenous foreign policy, mainstreaming Pasifika into diplomacy and security assistance, and general Pacific literacy of the population in New Zealand. Although New Zealand maintains an independent foreign policy driven by its values, it is often called upon by other partners to assist in facilitating relationships in the region, given the effectiveness of its statecraft.

In Chapter 10, Joanne Wallis, Chloe Le, and Alexander Jun-Li Yeong analyse four of the most prominent Asian partner states developing their engagement in the Pacific Islands region: India, Indonesia, Japan, and South Korea. India, Japan, and South Korea held bilateral summits with Pacific leaders in 2023, and Indonesia has longstanding relationships in the region, particularly by virtue of its associate membership of the Melanesian Spearhead Group. This chapter begins by analysing what strategic interests are motivating these Asian partner states to enhance their focus on the region, before outlining what tools of statecraft they are deploying, and how they are cooperating (or not) with others. It concludes by arguing that while India, Indonesia, Japan, and South Korea each have unique reasons for their interest in the region, they are primarily motivated by their strategic concerns about China’s increasing assertiveness and their perceived need to be seen to be responding throughout the entire Indo-Pacific region, and in Indonesia’s case, by its interest in circumventing the independence aspirations of West Papua.

Similarly, in Chapter 11, Henrietta McNeill and Nicholas Ross Smith analyse the European Union, France, Germany, and the UK’s statecraft in the Pacific Islands region. Like other partners, Europe has gained a sudden interest in the ‘Indo-Pacific’ as part of emerging geostrategic competition between the US and China – portraying Europe as a ‘mediator’ to prevent conflict. European countries have historically had colonial relationships with many PICs, but over the last few decades their statecraft had waned to the point of invisibility. Until very recently, only France was actively deploying statecraft within and through its territories, French Polynesia, New Caledonia,

and Wallis and Futuna. But with geopolitical competition, Europe has begun deploying tools of statecraft in the region again: through visits and the establishment of special envoys. This chapter analyses the intention and effectiveness of such statecraft, and the potential implications for the Pacific Islands region.

In Chapter 12, Geyi Xie turns to our final case study: China. Most analyses of China's statecraft in the Pacific Islands region have focused primarily on whether China's expenditure of material resources – whether they be aid, loans, scholarships, investment, or the activities of state-owned corporations – can reshape regional order in its favour. This chapter shifts its focus to exploring China's efforts to use ideational resources by examining the strategic narratives that China has deployed in the region. Based on an extensive analysis of Chinese official discourse, this chapter identifies the three relatively consistent strategic narratives in the region over the last decade. It argues that China has built on its narrative of shared historical and colonial experience to support its narrative of the value of South-South cooperation, which it has used, in turn, to justify its narrative of the opportunities offered under its Belt and Road Initiative.

Finally, in Chapter 13, William Waqavakatoga, Priestley Habru, and Maima Koro consider how PICs have responded to China's statecraft. While contributors to Smith and Wesley-Smith (2021) discussed how certain PICs had responded to the material aspects of China's statecraft, this chapter turns its attention to how they have interpreted, adopted, and/or instrumentalised one of China's most important soft power tools of statecraft: strategic narratives. Based on case studies of Fiji, Solomon Islands, and Samoa, this chapter argues that while Fijian, Solomon Islands, and Samoan leaders have, at times, incorporated elements of China's strategic narratives into their discourse when justifying their foreign policies, they have done so using their own interpretations and, at times, instrumentalised those narratives for their own purposes. This suggests that narrative power is more limited than it is often assumed, although it may have indirect effects, with China's narratives in the Pacific Islands region, as well as their instrumental adoption by PICs, motivating changes in the policies and narratives of metropolitan powers.

Notes

1 This chapter is based on Wallis, J., McNeill, H., Tidwell, A. and Tubilewicz, C., 2022, *Statecraftiness: weaving webs of statecraft in the Pacific Islands, Adelaide Papers on Pacific Security 01/2022*, Stretton Institute, University of Adelaide, Adelaide; and Wallis, J., McNeill, H., Rose, M. and Tidwell, A., 2023, *Statecraftiness: the need for responsive rather than reactive statecraft in the Pacific Islands, Adelaide Papers on Pacific Security 04/2023*, Stretton Institute, University of Adelaide, Adelaide.

2 Adapted from Holsti, K.J., 1976, 'The Study of Diplomacy', in JM Rosenau, KW Thompson, and G Boyd (eds), *World Politics*, Free Press, New York; and Baldwin, D.A. 1985, *Economic statecraft*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey.

3 New Zealand and Australia also have long-standing volunteer programmes.

4 The discussion that follows draws on Wallis, J. and Tubilewicz, C. 2022, "Alarm over China-Solomon Islands deal brushes over limits of our 'influence' in Pacific", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 April, <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/alarm-over-china-solomon-islands-deal-brushes-over-limits-of-our-influence-in-pacific-20220420-p5aeta.html>

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2 Pacific Islands' statecraft

Where relationships are more important than might and money[1]

Derek Futaiasi, Priestley Habru, Maima Koro, William Waqavakatoga, and Henrietta McNeill

Introduction

In the Pacific Islands region, partner states are weaving webs of statecraft to try to influence or coerce Pacific Island countries (PICs) to change their behaviour. In the region, weaving is a traditional practice used to bring people together, facilitate collaboration, and provide for communities by creating mats for talanoa discussions, baskets and bilums for holding resources to barter, and nets for fishing to ensure the community is fed. That is, weaving is used for both diplomacy and security.

This chapter interprets the metaphor of weaving statecraft through a Pacific lens, focussing on PICs' activities to influence their partners and one another through statecraft. We do not measure what influence or outcome these actions have had, as this is subjective. For example, *achieving* international agreement is different from *adherence* to international agreement: while the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty [1985] was agreed upon by PICs, the United States has still not ratified the three associated protocols. Instead, we look at how PICs are deploying tools of statecraft with the *intent* of influencing behaviour. By analysing the major tools of statecraft (security and defence; economic; diplomatic; soft power; grey-zone; black-zone), we draw focus away from partner actions, and examine how PICs are weaving statecraft to influence their partners.

We argue that PICs are effective at using diplomatic tools of statecraft to influence partner states and one another. In the Pacific Islands region, influence is not necessarily based on financial or security resources. Therefore, changing partners' behaviour or beliefs is often achieved through collective approaches to influence, or to resist influence. Through the Pacific Way, intra-regional statecraft often manifests through dialogue. PICs weave statecraft, each in their own distinctive way, applying 'Oceanic diplomacy', 'the distinctive diplomatic practices and principles which come out of the long history and diverse cultures of the Pacific Islands' (Carter, Fry and Nanau 2021, p. 1).

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Security and defence

With only three militaries in the Pacific Islands region (PNG, Tonga, and Fiji, and a paramilitary in Vanuatu), PICs have engaged in security cooperation at the regional level as a means of statecraft since PNG's deployment to respond to the Santo rebellion in the lead-up to Vanuatu's independence in 1980. Bilateral and regional security support has continued, through the Bougainville crisis from 1997, the International Peace Monitoring Team to Solomon Islands in 2001, and the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) from 2003 to 2017, and beyond.

Prior to RAMSI, then-Prime Minister of Solomon Islands Manasseh Sogavare called the proposed Australian military intervention, 'nothing short of re-colonising this country. This honourable house is being deliberately used as a puppet for overseas agenda' (The Age, 2003). Incoming Prime Minister Allan Kemakeza deployed tools of statecraft in the country's interests while resisting unilateral influence from Australia: he requested a regional peacekeeping response under the Pacific Island Forum's (PIF) Biketawa Declaration [2000], which provides scope for PIF members to support each other when experiencing volatile situations. PICs that participated in RAMSI contributed to its success through their Pacific approach to security and better understanding of Melanesian norms. For example, many Pacific RAMSI personnel communicated in local Solomon Islands pidgin. A similar approach was effective during the 2021 riots in Solomon Islands: Fiji supported the Australian response by deploying peacekeepers, and PNG contributed troops through a bilateral agreement.

In 2022, PNG agreed to bilateral security agreements with the United States and Australia respectively, leveraging new-found geopolitical interest in the region to build its defence capability and infrastructure. This follows Fiji, which leveraged geopolitical competition to secure Australia's commitment to redevelop its Blackrock Peacekeeping and Humanitarian Assistance & Disaster Relief Camp. The Blackrock Camp trains Fijian peacekeepers, which reflects that Fiji has deployed personnel as United Nations (UN) peacekeepers since 1978. Samoa, Timor-Leste, PNG, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, and Palau have also contributed to UN peacekeeping missions in locations such as Sudan and South Sudan. Tonga has contributed to coalition forces (outside of the UN) in both Iraq and Afghanistan. As contributors to international peacekeeping, PICs not only build their capacity and generate income, but subvert external narratives of PICs as areas of crisis, to instead demonstrate that PICs can play a role in alleviating them.

Policing is another way of exercising statecraft in regional security. Thirteen PICs deployed 163 police officers to RAMSI. The people-to-people links created through these deployments were so meaningful that some children of those deployed were named Ramsi (Putt et al. 2018). This 'living memory' is an affirmation and reflection of positive influence between PICs: respect, and long-term relationality, symbolic of embedding into oral histories the

good relationships that continue for generations to come, cementing regional solidarity and collective statecraft. Pacific police officers were also deployed regionally under the Biketawa Declaration in other situations, including the Regional Police Support Mission in Bougainville in 2019.

Policing connections are maintained through the Pacific Islands Chiefs of Police (PICP) and other regional law enforcement agencies, which enable further collaboration on cross-jurisdictional investigations. PICP efforts have also led to shared learning – the Cook Islands police has delivered command and control training around the region, and the Solomon Islands police has provided use of force and public order management training to Nauru and Samoa. Fiji has become a regional hub of forensic training, assisting Vanuatu with forensic policies, and attaching Tongan and Samoan police officers on secondments. In 2023, Solomon Islands and PNG announced a bilateral agreement to facilitate police deployments, which was described by Solomon Islands Permanent Secretary of Foreign Affairs Collin Beck as 'Wantok states connected by geography, culture and blood. Melanesian solidarity and diplomacy' (Beck 2023).

The PIF was one of the first regional bodies to develop a facility for Disaster Risk Reduction: the Regional Natural Disaster Relief Fund in 1975. Since then, PICs have been increasingly involved in supporting one another, and their partners, when natural disasters strike. Following New Zealand's 2010–2011 Christchurch earthquakes, trade workers arrived from Fiji, Tonga, and Samoa to help with the reconstruction through a trades training scheme. During Australia's bushfires in early 2020, PNG deployed 100 defence force personnel from an engineering battalion, and Fiji deployed 54 military personnel under the Republic of Fiji Military Force's Climate Change Disaster Emergency Response, while Vanuatu provided financial assistance. Fiji responded to Tonga's Hunga Tonga-Hunga Ha'apai volcanic eruption and tsunami in 2022, with Fiji Military Forces engineers, medics, and infrastructure specialists boarding Australian naval support vessels. Similarly, Fiji sent 34 military personnel to assist New Zealand after Cyclone Gabrielle in February 2023. Humanitarian assistance and disaster relief as a tool of statecraft has multiple benefits: it assists the neighbour in need and establishes trust between states; it develops capacity and utilises the skills of the PIC providing support; and it demonstrates the shared political importance of climate change and natural disasters as existential threats.

Economic

Economies of scale and high costs of shipping make trade difficult and expensive for most PICs. In response, PICs have collaborated to ameliorate these barriers to trade through the Pacific Island Countries Trade Agreement (PICTA); the European Union (EU) Economic Partnership Agreement [2011]; [2001]; and the Pacific Agreement on Closer Economic Relations (PACER) Plus [2020]. Fiji and PNG opted to stay outside PACER Plus as

they were sceptical about its benefits, but have benefitted from temporary labour migration programmes created to entice them to the negotiating table. Negotiations require tools of statecraft to be deployed from both sides, and this is an example where both sides deployed economic statecraft tools – resistance and inducement.

Trade fairs are a popular tool of economic statecraft for PICs. Sometimes these are aimed at specific states, such as the Buy Samoa Made trade fair in Australia in 2015; some aim to bring people to the country, such as Tourism Fiji's annual trade show; and others seek a global outreach, such as Vanuatu, which has attended the World Expo since 1985 to promote trade and tourism. Promoting tourism shifts the narrative from framing the Pacific as 'dangerous' (particularly areas that have experienced unrest or coups) to framing it as 'paradise'.[2]

Sub-regional economic statecraft can be seen in the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) Trade Agreement [1993], which enables labour mobility for skilled workers and the free trade of goods between Vanuatu, PNG, Solomon Islands, and Fiji. PNG has made all MSG nationals' travel 'visa on arrival'. The MSG has built solidarity through these shared Melanesian economic means, building stronger negotiating platforms between partners (although not without tensions, as in the 'trade wars' in biscuits and kava between Vanuatu and Fiji). The MSG has leveraged funding from China and the EU; and formed strategic partnerships with the Jakarta-based International Coconut Community. This positions the MSG well, reflecting its original basis for establishment: to assert Melanesian independence outside of traditional colonial influence.

The establishment of the successful regional body, the Parties to the Nauru Agreement (PNA), to manage the Pacific's tuna purse seine fishery, was 'out of frustration largely that they [PICs] needed to have a strategy who played off the countries against each other' for tuna fisheries access (Aqorau 2019, p. 7). The South Pacific Tuna Treaty [1988] between 16 PICs and the United States was a similar reaction to exploitative fishing practices by US commercial fisheries. Using collective negotiations as a tool of statecraft against larger partners in areas like fisheries, where PICs have an economic resource advantage, has proven effective for PICs. In 2022, when the United States announced it would pay the Forum Fisheries Agency $US60 million annually over the next ten years under the Tuna Treaty at the request of the PIF, PICs suggested that this negotiating advantage could also be used for better climate change and maritime security provisions under the Treaty. Here, PICs are using economic statecraft to advance the Pacific's core priority of climate change, as seen in the Boe Declaration on Regional Security and the 2050 Strategy on the Blue Pacific Continent.

PICs are deliberate about the economic assistance they seek from partners. For example, China is perceived as a partner that can provide 'Access to markets, technology, financing, infrastructure. Access to a viable future', and most PICs maintain a 'friends to all, enemies to none' foreign policy (Taylor 2019).

PICs leverage strategic competition between partner states. Samoa sought Chinese support for 'areas that other traditional donors were not engaged in, but we [Samoa] considered vital to Samoa's development aspirations and nation building' (Malielegaoi 2015). When Solomon Islands and China confirmed a bilateral security pact in 2022, Australia suddenly reversed its previous policy of not providing budgetary support to Solomon Islands, and provided AUD$22 million. After decades of seeking additional support from the United States, the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) refused to attend the Pacific Summit with President Biden in September 2022 unless it got a better deal under the Compact of Free Association (CoFA) negotiations. Subsequently, in early 2023, RMI's CoFA negotiations with the United States were finalised with a new US$700m tranche of support, with Marshallese Foreign Minister Kitlang Kabua commenting that: 'It's because of China. We're not naïve' (McKenzie 2023). The CoFA negotiations are themselves an example of successful Pacific economic statecraft, where RMI, Palau, and Federated States of Micronesia (FSM) negotiated unrestricted migration and access to the United States, including for employment.

Diplomatic

The most visible tool of Pacific statecraft is diplomatic missions (set out in Table 2.1). PICs' overseas missions illustrate that diplomatic representation is not necessarily reciprocal (although it can be). For instance, Australia has diplomatic missions in every member of the PIF, but the Cook Islands, FSM, Niue, Palau, the Marshall Islands, and Tuvalu have no reciprocal diplomatic representation in Australia. New Zealand has more onshore Pacific diplomatic representation than Australia, likely due to diasporic ties. PICs who are closely geographically located often have representation in nearby territories, indicating their close relationships and diasporic ties – for instance, Vanuatu in New Caledonia; Samoa in American Samoa; Palau and FSM in Guam; and Solomon Islands and PNG have reciprocal missions.

PICs use diplomatic missions to signal relationships: in 2023, PNG announced it was withdrawing its trade office from Taipei, and Solomon Islands announced that it was seeking South-South cooperation by opening a diplomatic mission in India. Resource constraints challenge the ability of PICs to maintain widespread diplomatic representation, so their choice of where to invest is telling. The average PIC mission to the UN has three representatives, in contrast to Australia's 33 and New Zealand's 14 – PICs manage this collectively and share notes from meetings that others cannot attend (Manoa 2015). However, these choices sometimes involve trade-offs. In the United States, Pacific missions are predominantly based in New York, so that they can advance their goals at the UN. However, this affects their relationship with US political representatives, who are based in Washington, DC. When the United States increased its interest in the Pacific in 2022 and sought meetings, New Zealand and Australia funded Pacific diplomats to make the trip to Washington, DC from New York.

Table 2.1 Pacific states' diplomatic representation (excluding Honorary Consuls)

Location of Diplomatic Representation

State represented	*Australia*	*New Zealand*	*China*	*Taiwan*	*US*	*UN*	*Fiji/PIF*	*Japan*	*Guam*	*India*	*United Kingdom*	*Indonesia*	*UAE*	*Switzerland*	*Thailand*	*Philippines*	*Belgium*	*CNMI*	*Hong Kong*	*Singapore*	*Solomon Islands*	*South Korea*	*Malaysia*	*American Samoa*	*Cuba*	*PNG*	*New Caledonia*
Cook Islands		X					X																				
FSM			X		X	X	X	X	X																		
Fiji	X	X	X		X	X		X		X	X	X	X	X													
Kiribati	X	X	X			X	X																				
Nauru	X			X		X	X								X												
Niue		X															X										
Palau				X	X	X		X	X		X					X		X									
PNG	X	X	X	X (closure announced 2023)	X	X	X	X		X	X	X				X	X		X	X	X	X	X				
Marshall Islands				X	X	X	X	X														X					
Samoa	X	X	X			X	X	X						X			X							X			
Solomon Islands	X	X	X			X	X			X		X					X								X	X	
Tonga	X	X	X		X	X		X			X		X														
Tuvalu		X		X		X	X						X														
Vanuatu	X	X	X			X	X									X	X		X								X

Many PICs also have representation in Switzerland, Fiji, and Belgium, so that diplomats can attend meetings at the World Trade Organisation, PIF, and the EU and associated Africa Caribbean Pacific Group. Being able to negotiate as a group in which each state has an equal vote in global fora presents the Pacific with significant opportunity, and PICs have global roles in several UN organisations to influence outcomes that benefit their countries, including the UN Environment Programme (Fiji), UNICEF (PNG), and UN Women (Solomon Islands). Pacific leaders have also been elected to key positions, including Fijian diplomat Peter Thomson as president of the UN General Assembly in 2016 and Fiji's ambassador to the UN in Geneva, Nazhat Shameem Khan, as president of the UN Human Rights Council in January 2021.

Collectively, PICs have been effective caucusing as the Pacific Small Island Developing States (PSIDS) and the PIF-focussed Pacific Group, negotiating collectively on the world stage, particularly on climate change. Membership is important in deploying statecraft: the PSIDS is exclusive to Australia and New Zealand, which can at times affect the Pacific consensus on climate change. In addition, despite not being UN members, the Cook Islands and Niue are included in the official PSIDS logo, statements, and letterheads to signify their interests being furthered through the fora (Manoa 2015). These groupings, alongside membership of geographically broader collective negotiating organisations such as the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS), have been effective ways for PICs to deploy diplomatic statecraft to gain global support. Their influence is strategically spread throughout the international system, including the International Maritime Organisation, where, as part of the RMI-led Higher Ambition Coalition, PICs are leading the charge to decarbonise shipping. Key climate messages like '1.5 to stay alive' led by PICs in AOSIS generated global attention and solidarity, and were included in the Paris Agreement. Similarly, Vanuatu spearheaded the Loss and Damage facility, which was agreed at COP27.

Pacific leaders rely on their collective strength, with Tuvalu Foreign Minister Simon Kofe noting that: 'Everything that comes out of PIF … has to send the strong message that, as a region, we have clear goals and we are willing to express them on the international stage, so that other nations, regions and organisations sit up and take notice'. Pacific leaders, including then-Kiribati President Anote Tong, the late Marshallese Foreign Minister Tony de Brum, and then-Fijian Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama, have all spearheaded powerful strategic narratives including at the UN General Assembly, influencing negotiations on climate change through statements at the UN General Assembly. Pacific leaders use powerful visual imagery, such as Kofe giving his COP26 address filmed knee-deep in the ocean, 'we are sinking', and in 2018, Tuvaluan children sitting in water to welcome delegates to the PIF Leaders' Meeting. Each strategic narrative is authoritative, increasingly passionate, and blunt-intended (successfully) to garner global media attention.

PICs invest heavily in climate change negotiations as it 'remains the single greatest threat to the livelihoods, security and wellbeing of the peoples of the Pacific' as noted in the PIF Boe Declaration on Regional Security [2018]. Fiji presided over COP23 (although was unable to host in-country).[3] Vanuatu has also engaged in 'lawfare', using legal proceedings as a diplomatic tool of statecraft to pressure partner states to respond to climate change. Vanuatu led a coalition of 132 countries to seek (via the UN General Assembly) an advisory opinion from the International Court of Justice (ICJ) on states' legal obligations for climate action and the consequences of causing harm. An ICJ opinion in their favour could assist PICs to further influence climate negotiations. 'Lawfare' as a tool of statecraft has been used previously by PICs decrying nuclear testing, when Australia, New Zealand, and the RMI each launched ICJ cases against France and the United States respectively.

In leading climate negotiations, PICs have embedded Oceanic diplomacy as statecraft into international negotiations (Carter et al. 2021). Fiji generated the Talanoa Dialogue Platform at COP21 (which continued into COP24), a Pacific way of having open and honest discussion about the impacts of climate change. In addition, Fiji and the Secretariat for the Regional Environment Programme (SPREP 2018) provided pavilion space for kava, talanoa, and dance at COP23 and 24, inviting delegates 'to have a personal experience of Pacific culture, as well as to learn more about a region at the frontline of climate change impacts'. This level of personal connection to the impact of climate change has deeply affected world leaders; when Marshallese woman Kathy Jetn̄il-Kijiner read her poem about rising sea levels aloud at the 2014 Climate Leaders' Summit, there were few dry eyes in the room. At COP26, Barack Obama (quoted in Kaur 2021) highlighted Pacific Islanders' plight against climate change, urging collaborative progress with a Hawaiian proverb '*pupukahi i holomua*' (unite to move forward).

The embedding of Oceanic diplomacy focussed on relationships into climate change negotiations exemplifies Pacific forms of statecraft. In an expansion of the 'Oceanic diplomacy' concept, Anna Naupa describes how the Moto Lava Treaty on the maritime boundary between Vanuatu and Solomon Islands was signed after ceremonial dances, feasts, customary exchanges, and 'sealed with the drinking of kava and chewing of betel nut' (Naupa 2022).

When tensions boiled over at the PIF in 2021, it was in large part due to not following the 'Pacific Way': COVID-19 restrictions had meant that the leaders could not meet face-to-face, and the pre-arranged 'gentlemen's agreement' to have a Micronesian Secretary-General elected was not met. Micronesian states, through the Micronesian President's Summit (MPS), wrote to the PIF advising that they were leaving the PIF. It took meeting face-to-face in 2022, and careful apologies from the leaders of Fiji, PNG, Samoa, then-PIF chair Tuvalu, and the outgoing Secretary-General, to create the environment for the Suva Agreement to be developed. That Agreement formalised the previously informal agreement that a Micronesian would be the next PIF Secretary General, and that the office of the new Pacific Ocean Commissioner

(previously also the Secretary General) would be established in a Micronesian state. All Micronesian states (except Kiribati) agreed to the Suva Agreement in July 2022. By abstaining from re-joining the PIF and signing the Suva Agreement until February 2023, Kiribati was able to negotiate for further advantage at the Special Leaders' Retreat, ultimately obtaining the right to host the PIF sub-regional office.

Oceanic diplomacy was also important in bringing Kiribati back into the regional collective. One of the first acts that newly elected Fijian Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka took was to travel to Kiribati in efforts regarding 'reconsolidation of the region' (Chaudhary 2023). Rabuka described his actions as following the Pacific Way: 'when you deviate from that, and adopt other ways of thinking that are not regional, we tend to easily offend one another, but when we think alike, we think the Pacific way, it is so easy to repair damages and straighten paths that perhaps would lead us astray or away from the Forum' (quoted in Magick 2023). In his inaugural Fiji address, Rabuka (2022) stated that his 'first priority' as chair of the PIF was to 'engage in the diplomacy required'. During his visit to Kiribati, Rabuka undertook traditional ceremonies of 'boka' and 'i sevusevu' – in which he proffered an apology and expressed grief to the leader and people of Kiribati to encourage them to re-join the PIF. His efforts were successful, and Kiribati sent a letter indicating its intention to re-join the PIF not long after his visit. This repairing of relationships is important in Pacific cultures, and a significant diplomatic tool of statecraft (Koro et al. 2023). The focus on relationships demonstrates that might and money do not necessarily determine outcomes in the Pacific, a perspective which should be noted by partners.

PICs have also used diplomatic statecraft to manage their partners. The PIF hosts an annual Forum Dialogue Partners meeting to facilitate dialogue with key partners, which ensures partners engage PICs collectively. However, in 2022, unlike previous years when the Dialogue Partners meeting had been held immediately after the Leaders meeting, at the request of PIF leaders, the 2022 Forum Dialogue Partners meeting was separately held online. This demonstrated how PICs use regional mechanisms to constrain and influence partner states and avoid geopolitical contestation. Leaders have reiterated that they do not want to become 'the epicentre of a future confrontation' and instead will engage on their own terms (Panuelo quoted in Wesley-Smith and Finin 2022).

Geopolitical tensions escalated in 2022 when China proposed a regional security pact that they expected each state to sign individually – telling each state that they were the last one holding out. In successfully opposing the proposal, Samoan Prime Minister Fiamē Naomi Mata'afa argued that regional agreements should come through the PIF rather than be negotiated bilaterally. By contrast, the United States sought to negotiate collectively with the PIF on a joint declaration later that same year. Initially, Cook Islands, Niue, New Caledonia, and French Polynesia were not invited to the Summit hosted by President Biden, likely because of their constitutional statuses as freely associated states or territories (not recognised as sovereign by the United States).

Demonstrating regional solidarity, at Fiamē's request all PIF leaders were eventually invited. The final US–Pacific Partnership Declaration text heavily favoured Pacific interests and aligned to the PIF's 2050 Strategy on the Blue Pacific Continent. At the Summit, Biden announced the initiation of the formal process of recognition of Niue and Cook Islands as sovereign states, which showed the level of influence PICs had by ensuring their full representation. Pacific leaders collaborated successfully through diplomatic statecraft to assert their agency in partner negotiations.

PICs are very aware of their diplomatic relationships as tools of statecraft. When Australia, the United States, and New Zealand imposed sanctions on Fiji (2006–2014) and Fiji was excluded from the PIF and the Commonwealth (2009–2014), Fiji strategically sought out new partners. Using a 'Look North' approach, Fiji developed ties with Russia and China. However, regionalism was not abandoned – Fiji established the Pacific Islands Development Forum as an alternative space for PICs to meet outside of the PIF without the influence of Australia and New Zealand. Ratuva (2019: 101) characterised Fiji's attempt to 'outflank' New Zealand and Australia as involving 'geopolitical contestation of power and influence'. PICs are not bound by their existing relationships if there are problems, and can use diplomatic statecraft to achieve their goals by seeking out alternative partners.

In another example of diplomatic recognition as a tool of statecraft, the relationship between China and Taiwan is leveraged by PICs for influence. In 2019, Solomon Islands and Kiribati both 'switched' diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to China. Domestic politics and agency are often overlooked by external analyses of Pacific foreign policy, but these were decisive moves – although China offered incentives, the decision was made by Solomon Islands on a calculated basis. Moving towards the 2019 'switch', Honiara strategically undertook to establish a bi-partisan working group to examine the viability of shifting Taiwan-China diplomatic relations, including whether to remain with Taiwan, or to shift at a later date. Coupled with advice from the bi-partisan group (which set the Solomon Islands agenda in Beijing, having toured China and PICs) (Office of the Prime Minister and Cabinet 2019), the Solomon Islands Cabinet also received advice through a Cabinet paper from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and External Trade (MFAET), which proposed that Solomon Islands could expect a 'special treatment' from China should they switch (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and External Trade 2019). Arguably, the advice and reports from MFAET and the bi-partisan task force were enough for the Cabinet to decide on the diplomatic shift (despite a contrary Parliamentary report led by Peter Kenilorea Jr). Solomon Islands pushed its socio-political and economic agenda around infrastructure development and Constituency Development Funds against the backdrop of its political economy to influence power upon international partners. Honiara positioned its agenda and principles at the forefront of negotiations: Solomon Islands' interests were at the heart of the decision and diplomatic statecraft.

PICs have also succeeded in using diplomatic tools to pursue economic objectives when partner states' regulatory requirements have restricted their

trade access. Australia banned the import of kava due to health concerns in the 1990s. Persistent lobbying by PICs led to a pilot programme being developed for the import and regulated sale of kava, which has been beneficial for Pacific-based kava growers and exporters, and important to Pacific diaspora for participating in social, cultural, and medicinal traditions – kava bars are now popping up around Australia, and the product is available in major supermarkets.

The most notable way that PICs have used diplomatic statecraft to influence larger partners and their economic outcomes is through labour mobility. Australia piloted the Seasonal Worker Programme in 2008 for Kiribati, PNG, Tonga, and Vanuatu, and expanded the programme in 2012 due to pressure from PICs to include Fiji, Nauru, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Timor-Leste, and Tuvalu. Since then, PICs have strategically lobbied Australia to develop its labour mobility programmes (now collectively known as the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme). Diplomatic representatives of Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, New Caledonia, Vanuatu, Kiribati, and PNG all appeared before the Australian parliamentary inquiry into Strengthening Australia's Relationships with the Pacific, and their comments about issues of labour mobility 'dominated feedback' (Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade 2022, p. 45). In addition to noting the positives of the scheme, they raised concerns about access to healthcare and superannuation for workers, the impact on development, and the ability of family members to accompany workers. In many respects, their diplomatic efforts worked. A PALM scheme visa stream was announced to enable workers to stay for longer periods and thus earn more, and in 2023–2024 PALM workers will be able to bring their families (although they will not have access to Medicare). When the government removed the PALM contract from private contractor Palladium, installing the DFAT-supported Pacific Labour Facility, it appeared to recognise the government-to-government bilateral importance of the scheme. The new Australian government also established a new Pacific Engagement Visa, providing 3000 permanent migration spaces to citizens from PICs annually from 2024.

However, occasionally partners do not welcome perceived interference by Pacific diplomats. Vanuatu High Commissioner to Australia, Samson Fare, became aware of ni-Vanuatu citizens who were subject to exploitative practices in seasonal work, poor work conditions, and wage theft, and vocally criticised the labour mobility programmes. Records of his phone correspondence with missionaries regarding ni-Vanuatu citizens seeking safe haven were seized in a raid by the Australian Department of Home Affairs – an unusual action given his diplomatic status (Gould 2022).

Soft power

Regional solidarity is central to the collective strategic narrative of PICs: the Blue Pacific Continent. By asserting themselves as 'Large Ocean States' in contrast to the traditionally perceived 'weak' and 'vulnerable' small island states, PICs have represented the Pacific Ocean based on its vast geographical area and

its significant economic, social, and cultural importance (Kabutaulaka 2021). The 2050 Strategy on the Blue Pacific Continent, the PIF's key document, reaffirms this strategic narrative and leads their negotiations. This strategy has already been reflected in the US–Pacific Declaration, and it is likely to be included in future PIF-led regional agreements. There were initial concerns that the United States, New Zealand, Australia, Japan, and the United Kingdom had appropriated the strategic narrative when establishing the coordination tool Partners for the Blue Pacific (Fry, Kabutaulaka and Wesley-Smith 2022), although a later meeting of the Partners on the topic of Illegal Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing held in Honolulu included both partners and PICs, highlighting the influence of PICs' statecraft when acting as a collective.

Several social, cultural, and educational networks across the Pacific Islands region provide avenues for the exercise of soft power by PICs. Through institutions like the University of the South Pacific, Pacific students and scholars are brought together to regional hubs and through satellite campuses in each of the 12 member states. Networks develop – between scholars and politicians who have attended university together, between those who become political leaders or regional organisation leaders, and between officials and civil society practitioners.[4] Throughout the Pacific, there are people who individuals can call upon from their university days, including to help them make connections within their country – potentially to those in power.

These networks and people-to-people relationships are critical for influencing partner states. There are large Pacific diasporas in New Zealand, Australia, and the United States. Increasingly, the diaspora is becoming involved in the leadership of these partner states. For example, under the former Labour Government, New Zealand had multiple ministers New Zealand of Tongan, Samoan, and Cook Islands descent, and former Deputy Prime Minister Carmel Sepuloni is of Samoan and Tongan heritage. The changing face of politics has led to significant foreign policy changes in New Zealand, including the 'ifoga'[5] apology to Pacific peoples by then-Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern for the Dawn Raids: a series of immigration raids that disproportionately targeted Pacific peoples in New Zealand in the 1970s. This apology was largely promoted by Minister for Pacific Peoples, Aupito William Sio, whose own Samoan family had been raided at the time. Aupito's personal connection had a significant influence on this being a policy priority.

Indigenous issues are significant for Pacific peoples. During protests against the construction of the 30-metre telescope on the sacred Hawaiian land of Mauna Kea, Tongan community members travelled to the protests to demonstrate their support, presenting gifts such as kava, sugarcane, tapa, and mats to Kānaka Maoli and flying the Tongan flag in solidarity. Similarly, in 2019, the Samoan, Tongan, Rapa Nui, and Kānaka Maoli diasporas all displayed their flags and protested for Māori land rights at Ihumātao. The issues of land confiscation, sovereignty, and the right to land and water resonated deeply with Oceanic Indigenous peoples (Case 2021). These protests influenced changes in the approaches of settler-colonial governments. Moreover, the Pacific

diaspora has also taken legal actions; for example, the 1962 case of Falema'i Lesā, a Samoan national residing in New Zealand, was successfully argued, ensuring that Samoans present in New Zealand up until the conclusion of the court case would be recognised as New Zealand citizens, although New Zealand altered the law immediately thereafter.

Diasporic ties are also maintained through the churches, which are central to Pacific ways of life. Pacific church leaders are active in partner countries' governmental inquiries,[6] and are called upon regularly to provide community feedback. Churches are well-known property holders in partner states, owning halls for community use, residences for clergy, and churches. Church leaders are also involved in providing character references for their village members applying for labour mobility programmes, assisting with community-based policing, and providing disaster relief, including for seasonal workers affected by Cyclone Gabrielle. Churches helped get their members vaccinated against COVID-19; in Auckland, church leaders joined The Fono (coordinated Pasifika medical organisations in Auckland) and Tongan health providers to host a vaccination event for the Tongan community. Partner states are increasingly aware of the role of churches in the community, and Australia now funds such engagement through the Pacific Church Partnerships Program.

Outside of diasporic ties, PICs and communities also strategically establish close relationships with elites in partner states using cultural and traditional practices. Several prominent *palagi*[7] have been bestowed Samoan *matai* (chiefly) titles. In 2012, then-Auckland Mayor Tau'aletoa Len Brown was bestowed his title in Lepa, then-Samoan Prime Minister Tuila'epa Mailegaoi's village. New Zealand journalist Toleafoa John Campbell was given a chiefly title by Samoan Head of State Va'aleatoa Sualauvi II, and then-Head of Immigration New Zealand To'osavili Nigel Bickle and businessman To'osavili Len Thompson were both given their titles in the village of Poutasi, a village heavily involved in the New Zealand labour mobility scheme. It is uncommon for non-resident non-Samoans to be bestowed chiefly honours: these ceremonies were in gratitude for the support elites had provided to Pacific communities, Samoan rugby, and through labour mobility, respectively, under the Samoan principle that the pathway to leadership is through service. These titles were not merely symbolic, instead creating an ongoing personal and professional relationship between these individuals and their villages – there is an obligation to return regularly and to continue to provide financial support. Former New Zealand Prime Ministers and Foreign Ministers such as Phil Goff, Winston Peters, Bill English, and John Key, have also been given matai titles.[8] Then-Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer was also bestowed a matai title, but was said to be so embarrassed by the cultural attire that he had to wear that he asked all in attendance to destroy their photographs. By contrast, Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese seemed pleased to be welcomed to Wewak in PNG, including the presentation of a traditional headdress signifying his leadership by Rachael Somare, wife of late PNG Prime Minister Sir Michael Somare.

PICs also use sports to exercise soft power, portraying themselves positively on the world stage. PICs are active in regional sporting events such as the Pacific Games, and large crowds of diaspora supporters attend World Cup matches (particularly in rugby union and rugby league) and hold events for supporters to congregate and celebrate in areas with large diasporic populations like Otara and Logan. Fiji won the Rugby Sevens at the 2016 Olympics and gained global media coverage, which portrayed their 'national image and support government claims to legitimacy' (Connell 2018). In 2022, PIF leaders watched the Australian rugby league State of Origin game (the teams dominated by Pacific Islanders) with Australian Prime Minister Albanese. This led to Albanese calling for a PNG-based Pacific Islander National Rugby League team to join the Australian national competition likely in 2025. The New Zealand government already funds Moana Pasifika, a Pacific Islander team, to participate in the Super Rugby (rugby union) competition that also includes teams from New Zealand and Australia. The PNG Hunters and the Fijian Kaivitia Silktails already play in the second-tier rugby league competition in Australia. Pacific rugby and gridiron players, both diasporic and from the islands, win contracts and play globally – building the image of 'Polynesian' sport (Uperesa 2022). Approximately 40 percent of the Australasian National Rugby League professional players are Polynesian (Salesa 2017). In Australia and New Zealand, the mispronunciation of Pacific Islander players' names by commentators has become an important issue, with commentators pressured by diasporic fans to learn correct pronunciations, and Pacific Islanders increasingly leading commentary for commercial broadcasters (Borell and Enari 2024). One of the most significant acts of statecraft by PICs was securing changes in eligibility for the World Cup – enabling players with Pacific lineage who play overseas to be able to choose to also play for their PIC in the World Cup.

In the arts, the Festival of Pacific Arts and Culture is one of the largest events in the Pacific calendar, showcasing film, dance, music, and theatrical performances from all over the Pacific every four years. Other festivals are held annually, such as Auckland's PolyFest, and Te Maeva Nui held in Queensland, both of which stage diaspora talent. Pacific culture is becoming showcased in film, with Pacific landscapes, actors, and directors at the forefront of Hollywood (Malifa 2022). Even the popularity of Disney's Moana (2016), while controversial in its merging of Pacific stories and culture, highlighted Pacific and diasporic actors and musicians. Pacific artists, carvers, tattooists, musicians, and dancers (too many to mention individually) are all highly regarded globally.

Grey-zone

There are few instances of PICs using the grey-zone (mechanisms of coercion that do not involve military cooperation but might include interference or coercive economic levers) to influence other states. However, in one example,

the final 2022 security agreement between Solomon Islands and China has not been released, potentially driven by Prime Minister Sogavare's (unfounded) concerns that 'the local media have joined forces with foreign entities to attack him personally or his government's decision to switch allegiances to China' (Wickham 2022). However, the Solomon Islands government's secrecy about its security agreement with China also highlights how PICs can restrict access to information to influence partner states – Australia, New Zealand, and the United States have all expressed anxiety about not knowing the exact terms of the agreement, and have responded by making diplomatic overtures to the Solomon Islands government.

Some PICs have also constrained the freedom of foreign journalists to try to influence the reporting of sensitive issues. For example, foreign journalists have been: detained while covering the PIF meeting in Nauru, and in Kiribati while covering the diplomatic 'switch' to China from Taiwan; deported from West Papua by the Indonesian government; and banned for their reporting on sensitive issues. Recognising the influence that restrictions on the media can have, the United States increased support to the Media Association of Solomon Islands in 2020, and the UK-based BBC established a partnership with Solomon Islands media in 2022.

Some PICs have also tried to control social media: the Nauruan government imposed a three-year ban on Facebook in 2015; Solomon Islands contemplated a ban in 2019 but later reneged; and the then-Samoan Prime Minister launched an investigation against an online blogger who targeted him for assassination in 2019.

Deportation has also been used politically by PICs. For example, Fiji deported USP Vice-Chancellor Pal Ahluwalia and his partner after he exposed allegations of corruption and financial mismanagement under previous university administrations. He was allowed back into Fiji under the new government in February 2023. However, Nauru and Samoa both supported the Vice-Chancellor to continue working from satellite campuses, showing the strength of regionalism even when there are differences of opinion.

Black-zone

Similarly, there have been few explicit instances of the black-zone (covert activities such as political assassination or blackmail) statecraft by PICs. In 1988, the Kanak and Socialist National Liberation Front (an independence movement) took members of the gendarmerie (police) hostage in Ouvéa, New Caledonia, demanding that the French government begin independence talks. Riots in 2024 in New Caledonia have not seen that same level of black-zone statecraft, but there has been significant violence to try and achieve the goal of independence.

Similarly, West Papuan rebels took a New Zealand pilot hostage in 2023 (released in September 2024), stating that 'our new target are all foreigners: the United States, EU, Australians and New Zealanders because they supported

Indonesia to kill Papuans for 60 years. Colonialism in Papua must be abolished' (Webb-Ganon 2023). Their demand is for Indonesia to recognise West Papua as an independent nation. With Indonesia joining the MSG in 2015, the MSG's vocal support for the independence of West Papua decreased – leaving West Papua with few diplomatic routes for deploying statecraft and potentially leading to seeking other methods, including through the black-zone. Fijian Prime Minister Rabuka met with West Papuan leader Benny Wenda in February 2023 and publicly announced his support for West Papua joining the MSG, which potentially re-established a space for West Papua to deploy diplomatic statecraft instead of black-zone. However, the 2023 MSG meeting decided that West Papua did not meet the 'existing criteria' to join the fora, likely due to Indonesia's associate membership.

Fiji and Vanuatu have both supported questionable extradition practices by China. In 2017, 77 Chinese nationals were deported from Fiji in a joint operation between Chinese and Fijian law enforcement without going through the justice process in Fiji. In the case of Vanuatu, in 2019 China extradited six individuals (four of whom then held Vanuatu passports) back to China in the hands of Chinese police officers without telling the Vanuatu government what the charges to be laid were. While these actions could be seen as Chinese statecraft, PICs allowed them to occur, presumably after extracting something from China in return.

Conclusion

PICs are effective in their use of statecraft, despite having fewer material resources than their partners. To mitigate this, PICs act collectively and intra-regionally, particularly through using diplomacy as a 'show of force' to external partners. PICs weave statecraft using the same tools as their partners but in different ways. PICs rely more heavily on their Oceanic tools of diplomacy and relationships to influence other states and are less likely to use grey-zone and black-zone tools. Diplomacy in the broadest sense is not new to the Pacific. As communal societies, statecraft are the tools of their collaborative existence, and they leverage these mechanisms to their advantage. In light of increasing geopolitical competition, PICs are weaving different processes of statecraft to advance their interests as the Blue Pacific Continent.

Notes

1 An earlier version of this chapter was published as Derek Futaiasi, Priestley Habru, Maima Koro, William Waqavakatoga, and Henrietta McNeill, *Lalaga, tithiki, talia vata: Pacific Islands weaving statecraft*. Adelaide Papers on Pacific Security 02/2023. Adelaide: Stretton Institute, University of Adelaide, 2023.

2 Regarding concerns about 'paradise' as a narrative, see Alexeyeff and McDonnell (2018).

3 Pacific states have hosted smaller global meetings – for instance, Samoa hosted the UNSIDS meeting in 2014, and will host the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in 2024; PNG hosted the APEC conference in 2018.

4 While these education networks can be established through external educational awards such as Australian Awards or the New Zealand Aid Scholarships, individuals are often dispersed to different universities creating less of a network.
5 An *ifoga* is a Samoan formal cultural apology, requiring the wrong-doer to kneel under a mat until it is lifted in forgiveness by those who were wronged. It also requires reparations to repair the relationship.
6 See for example, Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade (2022) *Strengthening Australia's relationships in the Pacific*.
7 Foreign, non-Samoan
8 In a less obligatory manner, Niue named their only duck Trevor, after then-New Zealand Speaker of the House of Representatives Trevor Mallard – who personally sent New Zealand Parliament's condolences when the duck passed away.

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3 Scholarships as tools of statecraft[1]

Priestley Habru, Wilhelmina Utukana, Feagaima'ali'i Soti Mapu, Jim Tawa Biliki, and Epo Mark

Introduction

An increasingly important tool of statecraft being deployed by partner states in the Pacific Islands region is soft power, commonly defined as 'the ability to affect others by attraction and persuasion rather than just coercion and payment' (Nye 2004, p. 8). As noted in Chapter 1, this book has adopted a narrower definition of soft power as 'intentional deployment of mostly non-material resources to influence recipient states, actors, or individuals to develop positive beliefs, attitudes, and/or opinions about the partner state, or the partner state's worldview'. The most active soft power player in the Pacific Islands region is Australia, which has identified its desire to develop 'people-to-people connections' between small island states in the region (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2023). The Australian Government identifies education, sports, media, cultural, and church partnerships as integral to these connections.

Education scholarships are the most longstanding and well-developed aspect of Australia's people-to-people connections in the Pacific. Scholarships are seen as an important soft power tool, as educating Pacific people may facilitate their acceptance of the key norms and values of partner states offering educational opportunities. In the region, Australia partners with the University of the South Pacific, the region's pre-eminent university, and funds the Australia Pacific Training Coalition (APTC) to provide vocational education. The Australia Awards provide opportunities for Pacific peoples to study at Australian and Pacific tertiary institutions. The Australian Government also provides scholarships for Pacific Islands students to study at Australian tertiary institutions through the Australian Government Research Training Program International Fee Offset Scholarship and the Australian Government Research Training Program International Scholarship (Department of Education 2023). In 2020, the Australian government also created the Pacific Secondary School Scholarships Program to fund Pacific students to attend Australian secondary schools.

This chapter focusses on the Australia Awards as a soft power tool of statecraft. The Awards explicitly aim to 'build an engaged influential global

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network of leaders, advocates and change-makers and establish a network of ambassadors across the world' (Australia Awards 2022a, p. 22). Therefore, one of the intended outcomes of the program is 'Alumni viewing Australia, Australians and Australian expertise positively' (Australia Awards 2020, p. 9).

The developmental benefits of scholarships are clear – with investments in education outcomes widely recognised as leading to improvements in employment, health, the empowerment of women and girls, earnings for individuals, economic growth, social cohesion, and institutional strengthening for societies (The World Bank 2023). But less well-understood is whether, and how, scholarships are an effective tool of statecraft for Australia, and other states, seeking to improve their relationships with Pacific states and people. Does giving a Pacific student a scholarship improve that person's perception of Australia?

This chapter is written by a former Australia Award recipient, Priestley Habru from Solomon Islands, and incorporates the voices of Epo Mark from PNG, Feagaima'ali'i Soti Mapu from Samoa, and Wilhelmina Utukana and Jim Tawa Biliki from Solomon Islands. As Epo, Feagaima'ali'i, Wilhelmina, and Jim are current recipients of the Australia Awards, their comments have been anonymised. In this chapter, they discuss:

- Their experiences of their scholarships and studies in Australia;
- How holding one of these scholarships has shaped their opinion of Australia (and Australians); and
- What they plan to go on and do after their studies.

What are the Australia Awards?

The Australia Awards consist of three prestigious international scholarship schemes: Australia Awards Scholarships (AAS), which fund students to study at Australian tertiary institutions, the Australia Awards Pacific Scholarships (AAPS), which fund students to study at Pacific tertiary institutions, and Short Courses. The Australian Awards are administered by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and the Australian Centre for International Agriculture Research (ACIAR). The Australia Awards aim to contribute to the long-term development needs of Australia's partner countries, in line with global, bilateral, and regional agreements (Australia Awards, n.d.).

In 2022, 1,235 scholarships were provided for long-term study in Australia, 484 of which went to people from Pacific Island countries (240 of whom were from PNG) (Australia Awards, 2022a). A snapshot of the top ten recipient countries of the Australia Awards Scholarships in 2022 is displayed below (Australia Awards 2022b).

Top ten represented countries – Australia awards scholars in Australia (3/02/2022)

Rank	*Country*	*# of current scholars*	*% of total scholars*	*Female*	*Male*	*TVET*	*Undergrad*	*Postgrad*
1	Indonesia	156	26	84	72	0	0	156
2	Papua New Guinea	46	8	23	23	0	4	42
3	Kiribati	43	7	31	12	5	24	14
4	Samoa	40	7	25	15	0	39	1
5	Solomon Islands	39	7	23	16	0	26	13
6	Myanmar	36	6	23	13	0	0	36
7	Vietnam	31	5	17	14	0	0	31
8	Tonga	22	4	18	4	0	0	22
9	Laos	18	3	12	6	1	0	17
10	Nauru	16	3	8	8	0	13	3
—	All other countries, total	151	24	76	75	0	31	120
—	All countries, total *	598	100	340	258	6	137	455

* = *Total number includes ACIAR scholarships*

The AAS priority study areas are usually premised upon each individual country's critical human resource gaps and development needs in collaboration with the Australian Government. For instance, PNG's priority sectors are agriculture, education, governance, health, law and justice, transport, and infrastructure. People with disabilities are also encouraged to apply, as well as women, with the goal of graduates taking up leadership roles and contributing to the development needs of their respective countries.

Why did the students apply for an Australia Awards Scholarship?

One of the most important factors that the students identified when discussing why they applied for the AAS is the proximity of Australia to their own respective countries, with one noting that, even if they had not received the AAS, 'I personally would have still chosen to study in Australia because not only did it offer quality education, but it is also geographically closer to home'. Another commented that, 'if there is any option to study elsewhere outside Australia, to be frank, I would not accept it'. Similarly, another observed that:

> Australia is adjacent to Solomon Islands, the Melanesian sphere's closest neighbour, and the island nation employs the same technical standards in infrastructure as Australia. Even if a scholarship were available to study in the United States or Europe, I would still prefer to study in Australia since I feel a much greater connection with the country than with other countries.

The students also identified the perceived quality of Australia's education system as influential, with one noting that 'my reason for coming to study in Australia is because of its reputation of providing high-quality education and research, diverse culture, and welcoming atmosphere'.

The students also saw Australia as an attractive place to live, with one observing that it is 'known for beautiful landscapes and outdoor lifestyles'.

The students also explained their choices of study programmes, which reflected that one of the most common reasons for applying for an AAS was to contribute to their countries' development. One student observed that they intends to return with the knowledge they acquired to help their nation's economy grow. Another student is confident a postgraduate degree from Australia will meet their country's development requirements.

Experiences under the Australia Awards Scholarship

The students identified positive experiences of their studies in Australia so far, including:

- The opportunity to be taught by lecturers who are well-qualified in their respective fields of work;
- Access to quality support services like counselling and rich academic resources; and
- The convenience of reliable transportation, fast internet, and customer services.

The students also appreciated the knowledge and skills they feel they are gaining from their studies, and the world-class qualifications that Australian universities provide. One student was pleased with the work experience they had been able to gain while on their student visa. Another student observed that Australian universities embrace multiculturalism, which helps with the language barrier, cultural differences, and settling well into studies very quickly.

The students have also experienced some challenges. The most common were the difficulty of adapting to new norms of the learning environment and the lack of availability of courses relevant to their interest, with one noting that they were 'forced to enrol in courses that are not particularly relevant to my nation's development priority'. Some of the students also faced unconscious biases, racism, and difficulty finding relevant work experience alongside their studies.

Satisfaction with entitlements under the Australia Awards Scholarship

The students are generally satisfied with their entitlements as recipients of the AAS. This is also reflected in the Australia Awards Scholarships Surveys (Australia Awards, 2020). One student said the AAS is one of the best

scholarships that is offered in the Pacific Islands, as it includes tuition and living expenses that cover every basic need. 'Not only that but reunion fares as well where students can return home to visit families'. The lead author, Priestley Habru, as a former recipient of both the AAPS and the AAS, can attest to the benefits of these prestigious scholarships.

The benefits that AAPS recipients receive when studying at tertiary institutions in the Pacific are greater than what is received by fellow 'wantoks' who are under other scholarship schemes, such as those sponsored by their national governments. For instance, an AAPS recipient gets a fortnightly allowance while studying at the University of the South Pacific, whilst a Solomon Islands Government (ISIG) sponsored student gets a monthly stipend, which is sometimes delayed depending on available funds from the sponsoring government. Supplementary stipends such as for establishment costs and family accompaniment are also covered under AAPS. However, under AAS, the stipend does not increase if a recipient brings family members with them whilst studying in Australia. The primary AAS recipient under a student visa and his or her dependents are allowed to work for up to 48 hours per fortnight (Department of Home Affairs 2024).

Despite the satisfaction of students under AAS, they all recommended an increase to their stipend due to the rising cost of textbooks, rental markets, and food prices in Australia. One commented that:

> I recommend adding to the scholarship an increase in allowance at the beginning of each academic year to cover academic expenses such as textbooks which cost over a hundred dollars and Grammarly which is a software to correct grammar useful for assignments.

Another student suggested that increasing students' funding under the AAS would significantly improve their education outcomes because financial challenges can impact on students' academic performance.

Recommendations for enhancements to the Australia Awards Scholarship

While generally satisfied with their experiences under the AAS, the students identified ways in which the AAS could be enhanced to both improve their experience and the outcomes of their studies.

Although AAS Alumni support groups in each country and the Pacific region supported by DFAT through its embassies and high commissions, support new awardees with pre-departure briefings, and advice on networking, volunteering, and finding employment opportunities and integration training for new graduates, the students felt that more could be done to support them once they arrive in Australia. Therefore, the students recommended DFAT or ACIAR provide professional training to Pacific awardees relating to the norms and practices of Australian workplaces, accompanied by individualised

assistance to help them get work experience while they are in Australia, such as through internships.

The opportunity for Pacific awardees to extend their experience in Australia beyond their studies would both enhance their skills and employability, and allow them to develop professional relationships that they can draw upon once they return to their home countries. This would also benefit Australia, since, as noted above, the Australia Awards aim to 'build an engaged influential global network'.

The students also recommended that DFAT or ACIAR provide opportunities for Pacific awardees while they are in Australia to engage in research collaborations beyond their formal studies on issues of concern to the Pacific Islands, such as climate change and women's leadership. Again, this would enhance the skills of the Pacific awardees, but would also contribute to building networks between Australia and the Pacific that could endure once the students return to their home countries.

The students noted that, due to differences between Australia and their home countries, some of the material that they cover in their studies is not necessarily easily applicable to the Pacific context. To help address this, they recommended that their studies could be supplemented by parallel programs that help them to translate the material they are learning into their home context. For example, one student suggested that a tailored, parallel program that covered issues of concern in the Pacific, such as combatting environmental contamination through recycling facilities and sea level rise, would help their to make their engineering studies relevant to their home context.

Similarly, the students recommended that DFAT and ACIAR could offer additional capacity-building initiatives such as the Women Leading and Influencing (WLI) programme of AAS (Australia Awards 2023). This would boost the confidence and knowledge of Pacific students when they return home. Such programs, one student suggested, should be integrated into the academic curriculum of the institutions at which they study and involve other Pacific Islands students for greater collaboration on issues that they commonly share: 'This would open dialogues and possible collaborated research spearheaded by Pacific researchers of more than one country'.

Another student proposed that AAS awardees should be allowed to stay in Australia for a year or so after they have completed their studies to gain work experience in their fields. The current offerings of 'experiences shared through networking and LinkedIn is not sufficiently benefitting the awardees. This experience would be helpful in the country of their origin', they suggested.

Value of the Australia Awards Scholarship

The students all hope they will be employed in the field they are currently studying in Australia. Furthermore, they wish to contribute their new skills and knowledge to advance the development needs of their respective countries. They believe their knowledge and skills attained in Australian universities are competitive, well-recognised, and can contribute to the development

needs of their respective countries. The students also want to build on their networks established during their time in Australia to boost them in their work and their country's relationship with Australia.

The students want to go back and make a difference in their country's education, legal, business, and infrastructure sectors and either join or form networks and associations with fellow colleagues in their related professions and take leadership roles in whatever careers they will end upon completion of their studies.

Some of the students have had work experience before coming for studies, and thus they want to go back and apply their new set of skills and knowledge to improve the standards of their respective industries or institutions. One student wants to continue higher degree research with an increased focus on issues relating to the Pacific context.

The students are grateful to be selected to take up AAS. They are selected on merit through a rigorous selection process such as interviews and sitting for the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) or the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL).

One student observed that Australia's use of education as soft power will further strengthen ties between Australia and the Pacific as a whole.

> The Pacific is small, but we are not as insignificant as it may seem. We offer Australia a unique combination of stability, cultures, and future partnerships that is unmatched elsewhere and can only be offered by someone in the same sphere as Australia. My education will allow me to strengthen these ties for the prosperity of my country, Australia and the Pacific region. As the Australia Awards programme is a prestigious and well-recognized scholarship programme, it is hoped that more scholarship quotas would be allotted in the future for study programs that are associated with climate action as climate change has now become a major threat to our way of life and food security.

Conclusion

Many AAS alumni in the Pacific have gone on to become prominent leaders in business, government, non-government organisations, regional, and even international organisations and institutions. While Pacific students' perception of Australia varies, when they graduate and go back to their own countries, they experience the value of their AAS through work promotions and national alumni support groups. Australia's institutions and businesses operating in the Pacific often look for AAS graduates to employ, and Australians working in the high commissions or embassies in the Pacific are always active and present in supporting local AAS alumni groups. This reinforces Australia's people-to-people connections with its closest neighbours in the Pacific Islands region beyond universities, colleagues, and lecture rooms.

Therefore, education, in this case the AAS, is a key soft power tool of statecraft. This suggests that Australia should maintain, and we argue enhance, the AAS to increase both its developmental value, and its role in improving Australia's relationships in the Pacific Islands region. Our proposed enhancements are:

- Increasing the number of AAS offered to Pacific Islands recipients. Only a relatively small number of awards are made in each Pacific Island country each year (except PNG, which has a much higher population).
- Increasing the value of awardees' entitlements under the AAS to reflect the rising cost of living in Australia.
- Offering professional development and targeted assistance to facilitate awardees developing their professional skills and gaining work experience while in Australia.
- Allowing students to stay in Australia for a year after their studies to gain professional experience.
- Offering parallel programs that help awardees to translate the material they are learning into their home context.

Note

1 An earlier version of this chapter was published as Habru, P., Utukana, W., Mapu, F.S., Biliki, J.T. and Mark, E. 2023, *Australia's Pacific scholarships as a tool of statecraft: Student perspectives*, Stretton Institute, University of Adelaide, Adelaide, 2023.

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4 Reimagining economic tools of statecraft[1]

Maima Koro and Henrietta McNeill

Introduction

In 2022, Fijian Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka remarked that Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States had 'seen us as output of their colonial regimes of the past and have not reorientated their thinking to the international landscape where we are all equal' (in Movono 2022). Australia has been accused historically of treating Pacific Islanders as commodity labour, and their islands as sources of materials to be extracted for economic benefit (Banivanua-Mar 2006). Documented exploitation of island resources for offshore benefit by companies and governments spans centuries, via blackbirding (indentured labour), phosphate and mineral ore mining, native timber logging, and oil and gas extraction. While some (not all) of these practices lie in the past, through a logic of habit, many of the characterisations that underlie past exploitations remain and have skewed Australia's statecraft towards the Pacific Islands region. Until recently, Australian foreign policy circles assumed that 'Australia enjoys enormous clout' in the region, yet there is little critical self-reflection on how colonial practices and presumptions persist and affect contemporary economic statecraft and influence with Pacific Island countries (PICs) (Fernandes 2018, p. 1). Instead, Australia has sought to utilise 'all the tools of statecraft' in their existing forms to ward against geopolitical competition (AP4D 2023), rather than developing an evolving quiver of tools for understanding, repairing, and deepening relationships with Pacific countries to generate long-term influence.

To analyse colonial logics in Australia's economic statecraft with the Pacific Islands region, we begin by outlining our analytical framework, which melds existing and evolving literature on statecraft with constructivist international relations literature regarding Hopf's (2010) 'logic of habit' – continued patterns of understanding and practice reinforcing perceptions and stereotypes. We then identify three areas where challenges are posed by a habitually-embedded colonial legacy in Australia's contemporary economic statecraft – migration, trade, and official development assistance (ODA) – and contemplate ways to modernise and optimise opportunities within these relationships. We conclude by considering how Australia could reimagine relationships with the Pacific

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Islands region outside of these colonial logics of habit, and where authentic, mutually beneficial opportunities for partnership may lie.

Relationships are central to foreign affairs – particularly in the Pacific Islands region, where relationships are the 'enduring currency of influence' (see Chapter 2). In turn, relationships are about people. Relationships with PICs must be reimagined by recognising Pacific people's choices and agency: that they are not simply commodities to fulfil Australia's economic needs. Pacific people and countries are neither passive actors nor incapable, and any such consideration is the outdated colonial mindset that we argue strongly against. Statecraft 'is no longer the prerogative of developed or western nation-states': PICs decide which aspects of partner statecraft to accept or reject, and actively deploy their own tools of statecraft to influence partners' behaviour (Prantl and Goh 2022, p. 446; Chapter 2). Successful bilateral relations must be grounded within contemporary Pacific ambitions, their global and collective power, and not colonial logics – recognising that even in their absence, the colonial legacy cannot be forgotten. Only then, can genuine and influential partnerships be achieved.

Economic statecraft

In international relations, 'power relativities are now almost universally acknowledged as being tied to economic performance', where economic tools of statecraft are favoured in achieving foreign policy outcomes over militaristic tools of statecraft (Gyngell and Wesley 2003, p. 243; Baldwin 2020). Economic statecraft is defined as 'governmental influence attempts relying primarily on resources that have a reasonable semblance of a market price in terms of money', spanning from economic diplomacy to influence behaviour, to economic sanctions and 'trade wars' to coerce change (Baldwin 2020, p. 29). Through trade agreements and investment treaties, economic statecraft is 'a regular feature of Australia's external relations' (Fernandes 2018, p. 4; Wong 2023).

Baldwin (2020, p. 42) lists 'Not-So-Obvious Forms of Economic Statecraft', including tools of statecraft like purchasing power, market access, foreign direct investment, market preferences, government procurement, funding, free trade, and tariffs. While not strictly speaking economic tools of statecraft, there are aspects of ODA and migration policy which demonstrate governmental tilts at influence, particularly under Australia's Pacific Step-Up. Therefore, we add ODA and migration to Baldwin's list *if* they are deployed with the intention to influence. ODA and migration both appear on AP4D's (2023) mapping of tools of statecraft.[2] While migration is often considered soft power statecraft facilitating cultural and people-to-people links, it is also deployed to benefit economic outcomes and adjust another state's behaviour. Similarly, while ODA is not *only* for the purposes of influence, Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong (2023) considered ODA 'central to statecraft' as it 'helps our regional partners become more economically resilient, develop

critical infrastructure, and provide their own security so they have less need to call on others', thereby changing behaviours.

A (colonial) logic of habit

How tools of statecraft are deployed depends upon pre-existing notions that create predictability and stability within the international order: designating states as allies, friends, or enemies (Hopf 2010). Drawing on the social context of policymaking, Hopf's 'logic of habit' describes states invoking stereotypes based on previous interactions, which shape future actions subconsciously through 'ready-made responses to the world' (2010, p. 541). In some ways, 'the logic of habit denies rationality (conscious reflection on behavior and beliefs) and thus precludes agency and uncertainty—two lynch-pins of social scientific inquiry' (Hayes 2015, p. 506). Historical knowledge and insights 'permeate' how states continue to interact with the world (Brands and Suri 2015, p. 2). Through cognitive bias, it is often presumed that there is little need to reflect upon the basis of foreign policy relationships or amend them: over time, identities become ingrained without revision as habit, resisting changes across governments, and rigidifying relationships (Prantl and Goh 2022). Some states even project historical narratives as tools of statecraft (Smith and Fallon 2024).

Perception and practice create structures of power and control, and perpetuating negative depictions enables ongoing imbalances, justifying colonial and neo-colonial approaches (Said 1978). Kabutaulaka (2015, p. 111) describes 'racialist mapping', whereby the Pacific Islands region was framed for over two centuries in terms of race and colour, and colonial discourse as 'inferior' and 'savage'. Even before settler-colonial Australia's Federation [1901], threat, race, and labour were central to relations with the Pacific Islands (Wallis 2017). In 1905, Australia took colonial control of then-British New Guinea (Papua), and in 1921 accepted the League of Nations mandate for then-German New Guinea.[3] Under the same mandate, Australia shared control of Nauru with Britain and New Zealand, both briefly broken by Japanese occupation during WWII. Shared trusteeship continued until Nauruan independence in 1968, and PNG gained independence in 1975. During these administrations, Australia minimised funding allocations and territories received little attention reflecting a policy of benign neglect (Wallis 2017). In the early 1900s and again in the 1950s, there were discussions about Australia administering Solomon Islands and the New Hebrides (now Vanuatu), but Australia expressed concern about increased administrative budgets (Thompson 1996). Colonial dynamics fiscally benefitted Australia, particularly in acquiring cheap natural resources for agricultural and manufacturing development.

Fernandes (2018, p. 133) argues that 'Australia began its existence on the winning side of a worldwide confrontation between colonial power and colonized peoples. The organizing principle of Australian foreign policy is to stay

on the winning side of that encounter'. In establishing formal relationships with PICs as sovereign states post-independence, Australia found it 'difficult' to engage, as sovereignty contradicted the '"colonial mentality" that persisted' (Wallis 2017, pp 43–44). In the 1980s, Australia began to intervene in the area it now designated its 'backyard',[4] responding to security anxieties stemming from independence struggles in New Caledonia, coups in Fiji, riots in Vanuatu, and tensions in Bougainville. Australia aimed to 'protect' the region from itself and foreign influence, using ODA to shape political outcomes and maintain Australian influence (Gyngell 2021, p. 135). Even in the 2000s, Australia was claiming that the region was an 'arc of instability', 'weak' and 'failing', suggesting states were susceptible to external influence, with limited governance and implied corruption (Wallis 2017). Australia's multiple security agreements with Pacific states to deter Chinese influence since 2018 have been seen as suggesting PICs are 'not smart, strong, and sophisticated enough to stand up to China's manipulative intents', reinforced by continued neo-colonial assumptions of the region as Australia's 'backyard' (Ratuva 2022). Such framing of Pacific people and PICs assumes that they are fixed at a particular point in time, 'still stuck in the racialized map of Oceania constructed by early Europeans and sustained by contemporary discourses' – an obvious colonial logic of habit (Kabutaulaka 2015, p. 119). Instead, Ratuva (2022) asserts that the 'old order where colonial paternalism, imperial patronage, racialised narratives, and belittling perceptions shaped relationships no longer have any place'.

Australia's statecraft has developed over time, yet scholars trace significant continuity in its foreign policy (Fernandes 2018; Gyngell 2021). Australia's foreign policy is 'regularised and routinised' through a series of institutions and processes, creating patterns of habitual response (Gyngell and Wesley 2003, p. 250). In doing so, Gyngell (2021) argued that Australia has learnt to deal with foreign governments in particular ways, repeating tried and true methods of engagement. Describing such continuity, Wallis (2021, p. 492) argues that 'Australian leaders have long demonstrated a habit of believing that Pacific states are small, weak and at risk of instability, making them vulnerable to influence'.

State and national identities are not static, although change requires intentional effort to 'break habituated beliefs' in international interactions (Hayes 2015, p. 505). With independence, and the call for equal partnerships by formerly colonised states – there is an urgent need to question preconceived colonial notions in relationships and reimagine modern statecraft. Australia restructured relations with Asia in the 1990s following a wave of decolonisation (Gyngell and Wesley 2003; Gyngell 2021), but the same has yet to be seen in relationships with PICs.[5] To adapt, statecraft scholars propose engaging with new international actors, emerging multifaceted challenges, and using cultural and social strengths to improve relationships; however, the 'key challenge is one of mindset' – breaking the colonial logic of habit (Prantl and Goh 2022, p. 449; Gyngell and Wesley 2003).

Migration

Pacific people were exploited as indentured labour to support the sugar industry in Australia (Banivanua-Mar 2006; Stead and Davies 2021). Once Pacific people were no longer 'required', they were removed through mass deportations under the Pacific Island Labourers Act [1901]. Even now, Pacific people are often pejoratively perceived as 'passive actors in a game of global labor exchange' between developed countries and the 'exploited "periphery"' – temporary, and disposable once no longer required (Lilomaiava-Doktor 2009, p. 3; Stead and Davies 2021; Petrou and Connell 2023; McNeill and Marmo 2023).

Through Australia's colonial era, Papuans (then-Australian citizens) and New Guineans were excluded from the mainland, and restricted under master- and servant-type structures (Hoskins 2021; Stead and Davies 2021). Almost completely restricted from entering under the White Australia Policy (1901–1973), Pacific people continued to face targeted travel restrictions to Australia even after the policy officially ended (McNeill and Marmo 2023). This has resulted in comparatively small Pacific populations in Australia today, most migrating via New Zealand. Australia is a rarity as a former coloniser in not providing special migration pathways to citizens of its former colonies. Pacific peoples (including Nauruans and Papua New Guineans) wishing to travel to Australia in most capacities still face challenging and restrictive visa processes that 'physically exclude' them, 'with the underlying paternalistic message being that Pacific peoples can come to Australia temporarily to earn or learn, but not as skilled migrants who may contribute to the long-term development of Australia' (Wallis 2023, pp. 6–7). Solomon Islanders have described Australian visa processes as 'frustrating and demeaning', causing tensions in the relationship (quoted in Newton Cain, Cox and Presterudstuen 2020, p. 24). Fijian scholar William Waqavakatoga suggests that Australia should consider its colonial history, when claiming 'family' when 'we still need to RSVP via visas to come to Australia' (quoted in McNeill et al. 2023, p. 12). The incongruence between Australia's foreign policy narrative of 'Pacific Family' and its restrictive visa processes receives significant scholarly criticism (Wallis 2021; Stead and Davies 2021; Petrou and Connell 2023).

Labour mobility

Facilitating Australia's economic needs, the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM)[6] scheme funnels Pacific workers into horticulture, meat processing, aged care, hospitality, and agriculture – sectors where 'Australians don't want these jobs and they need to be done by someone' (Owen 2015). PALM generates returns to Pacific workers, their families, communities, and countries primarily through remittances and shared skills (Doan, Dornan and Edwards 2023). However, workers receive comparatively low wages for long hours in remote areas, and PALM visas are precariously circular, requiring departure

following their contract's completion and an inability to change employers, resulting in vulnerability to exploitation under threat of deportation. Through PALM recruitment and visa conditions, 'racialisation has tended to keep Pacific people in the region in precarious employment and underlies the structural barriers they encounter when seeking alternative employment' (Nishitani, Boese and Lee 2023, p. 2). The PALM scheme was updated to include longer contract periods and family reunification (previously excluded to discourage long-term settlement), but the lens under which it was developed remains: Pacific labourers are contracted in constrained conditions to benefit Australia's economy, and must leave once that function is served. The PALM scheme is likened to the historical indentured labour of Pacific Islanders, demonstrating a colonial logic of habit (Stead and Davies 2021; Petrou and Connell 2023; McNeill and Marmo 2023).

Exemplifying Pacific state concerns about the consequences of labour mobility, in 2022 Samoa paused sending workers to Australia and restructured recruitment procedures, after finding that high-skilled professionals including nurses and police officers were taking seasonal work opportunities fruit-picking, and government institutions and businesses were suffering (Meleisea 2023). The PALM structure automatically assumes that Pacific workers are low-skilled and have no facility for highly-skilled roles – to undertake work appropriate to their professional competencies, Pacific migrants require their agency to be acknowledged in migration pathways. In economic terms, Pacific migrants' professional skills are underutilised – ironically, skills often developed through Australian ODA-funded programmes. Samoa will selectively participate in the PALM programme on their own terms, with Prime Minister Fiamē Naomi Mata'afa seeking to correct the impression that the Pacific Islands were 'just these outposts where we grow people… to send them off as labour mobility… as though that's our lot in life' (in Dziedzic, Voloder and Raela 2023).

Yet labour remains a habitual response to many questions about Australia–Pacific relationships. In a 2022 workshop, a senior Pacific diplomat asked how Australia could move beyond cooperation to collaboration in security areas like health, given the huge investment in capacity development. Australia's most senior diplomat to the Pacific Islands region responded that Australia is collaborating with Pacific countries on PALM (Stretton Institute 2022). The colonial logic of habit is evident in the automatic response: collaboration with the Pacific is understood in terms of Australia's economic benefit – through temporary labour schemes.

Tertiary education

As discussed in Chapter 3, tertiary scholarships as tools of statecraft create people-to-people connections and improve the educational outputs of sending countries, and 'allegiance and loyalty [to host countries] can be influenced through scholarships' (Aqorau 2022, p. 4; Lovai, Milli and Palmieri 2022). In 2021, PNG secured 233 of the 818 individual scholarships under the Australia

Awards scheme, and 93 went to students from other Pacific states (Lovai et al. 2022). Habru and Wallis (2023) argue that scholarships are more effective tools of statecraft than big infrastructure and defence investments; however, scholarships must give recipients a positive experience to generate their intended influence.

While many Pacific Australia Awards scholarship-holders express gratitude and gain significant technical and leadership skills through the experience, they also often experience 'unconscious biases, racism, and difficulty finding relevant work experience alongside their studies' in Australia (Chapter 3, p. 44; Kent 2024). Scholarship recipients also describe visa difficulties, delays, and subsequent halting of scholarship payments – generating anxiety, distress, and eventually hostility. Critically, Australian Awards scholars are required to leave Australia immediately after completion, or face incurring a debt for 'the total accrued cost of their scholarship' (DFAT 2023, p. 20). During COVID-19, Pacific scholarship-holders without income experiencing emotional distress asked, 'Why are we not looked after because it's the Australian Government that brought us here' (quoted in McNamara et al. 2020). Scholarships are supposed to generate goodwill and enduring relationships through statecraft, but negative experiences may undermine potential influence.

Australia Awards scholarship students (and their dependents) make 'significant contributions to the visitor economy, through recipients' living expenses, domestic trips, and visits from family and friends from overseas' (AusTrade 2022). The fees for their Australian education are also directly invested in Australian universities (Fernandes 2018). However, neither the financial, technical nor intellectual contribution of Pacific Islanders is acknowledged at the scholarships' conclusion (Aqorau 2022). At degree completion, students are required to return home for a two-year 'bond' before being able to return to Australia. This language of bonding has 'echoes of the language of indenture' and 'highlights the paternalistic nature of this requirement' (Wallis 2023, p 6; Kent 2024). This approach to education does not appreciate the benefit of Pacific Islander contributions while in Australia, but represents a 'continuation of colonial patterns of thinking' which keeps Pacific people temporary (Kent 2024, p. 4).

Government and business officials

Pacific government officials have raised concerns about difficulties entering Australia for official meetings, and visas are 'perennial headaches' for Pacific people accessing Australia for trade or official business, indicative of ineffective statecraft (Newton Cain et al. 2020, p. 7). Due to cumbersome visa requirements, Pacific organisations do not favour Australia as a destination for regional inter-governmental meetings and business negotiations, and Pacific government officials have missed Australian Government-funded meetings and trainings in Australia because of declined or delayed visas. Australia's

colonial migration policies therefore explicitly contradict statecraft efforts and affect Australian revenue.

PICs have requested visa-free access to Australia: Vanuatu stated that if Australia 'wanted closer economic relations, then they needed to open their borders to grant visa exemptions', (RNZ 2016). Both Samoan Prime Minister Fiamē (Knott 2023) and Fijian Deputy Prime Minister Biman Prasad (2023) publicly called for a visa-free Pacific Islands region. Neither received a public acknowledgement from Australian leaders. Australia remains an outlier on visas for Pacific people internationally, despite being the leading donor to the region. The European Union has visa-free access for nationals of nine PICs; Japan discussed potential two-way multiple-entry visa travel arrangements with PICs at PALM8 in 2018; and New Zealand is considering 3-year multiple-entry visas for Pacific businesspeople.

Only PNG participates in the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Business Travel Card scheme, allowing short-term business travel between APEC economies. It is unclear how many Papua New Guineans have applied for the card or used it to enter Australia. A similar scheme for Pacific Island businesspeople with regular engagement with the Australian and Pacific economies could benefit the relationship. A Pacific-Australia Card was touted as part of the Pacific Step-Up 'to streamline travel to Australia by Pacific Leaders' (DFAT 2019), but was described by Pacific businesspeople as: 'of no significant assistance to business. It is seen as elitist, and contrary to the spirit of "family" by which the Australian Government has sought to characterise in relations with the Pacific islands countries' (quoted in JSCFADT 2021). Inevitably, the card never transpired, continuing the habit of temporary and restricted access to Australia for Pacific Islanders.

Pacific Engagement Visa

The Albanese government responded to Pacific criticism and visa tensions in the Australia–Pacific Islands relationship and instituted the Pacific Engagement Visa (PEV) in October 2023. The PEV allows 3,000 Pacific Islanders aged between 18 and 45 ('working age') to be selected from a ballot from offshore for Australian permanent residency. PEV migrants can remain indefinitely and have employment flexibility, contrasting circular labour schemes. Favourably, the PEV ballot system 'gives equal chances to skilled and unskilled workers' (Howes 2023), facilitating migrant agencies, rather than narrowing choices towards low-skilled work. However, the Australian debate about the establishment of the PEV highlighted the ingrained colonial logic of habit. Former Australian senior immigration official Rizvi (2023) acknowledged that although secured employment was a PEV requirement, the policy assumption was that Pacific migrants would ultimately forfeit 'easy' job offers to remain in urban areas and collect welfare. Concern about Pacific migrants detrimentally affecting the economy was vocalised by Opposition MP Dan Tehan during a debate about the establishment of the visa, with experts suggesting that

Tehan's view seemed to 'verge on one of scepticism about the value of any migration from the Pacific at all' (Howes 2023).

Rejecting Prime Minister Fiamē's call for free movement, New Zealand then-Deputy Prime Minister Carmel Sepuloni's response contained assumptions that all Pacific people would move to Australia and New Zealand (Knott 2023). However, Fiamē countered by articulating that Pacific Islanders would 'just come do their business, visit their relatives, go on holiday in New Zealand and Australia, but go back home and not have such a difficult time coming into Australia or New Zealand' (quoted in Knott 2023). Fiamē's comments echo Cook Islands senior official Elizabeth Wright-Koteka's (2006) argument that perceptions of Pacific Islanders' migration and associated policies need to take individual agency into account – Pacific people are not travelling simply for economic reasons, but to see family, attend church, participate in cultural events, study, and seek new opportunities.

By removing colonial preconceptions, Pacific people should be seen as *people* with choices and agency within migration frameworks – travelling on their own terms – not solely for the benefit of Australia's economy, but contributing to Australia through social inputs, spending, and their skill: aiding statecraft and providing people-to-people links. The PEV is a departure from the colonial logic of habit, providing an opportunity to modernise migration policy frameworks. Pacific scholars remind us that migration is a 'two-way partnership' and that Australians should take the opportunity within the PEV to bolster their Pacific literacy (Rimon et al. 2023). Such a two-way partnership can begin by removing colonial logics of habit in policy design, to encourage agency and opportunity.

Trade

Australia colonised Papua by 'encourage[ing] European settlement', gaining access to land-based resources and bolstering Australia's economic prospects (Hoskins 2021, p. 271). In PNG 'Australia's most fundamental colonial economic policy was to promote Australian private enterprise' (Torrey 1974, p. 2). Australia extracted cheap resources for its own economic and agricultural growth – minerals, copra, cocoa, coffee and rubber from PNG, and phosphate from Nauru. The power dynamic was unequal, with the Pacific Islands gaining little by comparison to Australia's economic gain (Thompson 1996). Nauru eventually took Australia to the International Court of Justice for underpaying phosphate royalties, resulting in an out-of-court settlement and promised aid, with the undertaking that Nauru would not make any further claim against Australia (Teaiwa 2015; Fernandes 2018). Even outside of its colonies, by the 1960s Australian companies dominated Fiji's economy (Thompson 1996).

Australian-owned businesses have continued to profit from mining and logging operations on the back of local labour since PNG gained independence. Resource exports have limited financial benefit for PNG, when

business ownership lies elsewhere and complex tax structures result in little to no tax being paid by Australian companies. Australian mining company St Barbara operates in New Ireland and made an annual profit of AUD$199m (2017–2021), and yet paid no income tax in PNG between 2012 and mid-2020 (Nicholas and Lyons 2021). The Panguna gold and copper mine was established under the Australian colonial administration and operated by Australian mining giant Rio Tinto from 1972 to 1989, until community anger over the mine's environmental impact and unequal profit share led to civil war in Bougainville, and the mine was closed. Riots also followed environmental disasters at the Ok Tedi Mine, managed by Australian company BHP. These mines are 'particularly egregious examples of how Australian investments can generate more harm than benefit for Pacific Island states, thereby generating negative perceptions of Australia in the region and making it harder for Australia to effectively influence the region in pursuit of its strategic interests' – undermining statecraft efforts (Wallis 2017, p. 161).

There remains a significant trade imbalance between Australia and its Pacific neighbours, where Australia has been accused of plundering for its own gain, without considering more equitable trading options (Nicholas and Lyons 2021). PNG Prime Minister James Marape called for Australia to import more value-added products from PNG to adjust the trade balance, including food, finished forest products, and human resources at all levels (*Papua New Guinea Today*, 2022). However, Australia's share of trade has declined over the past decade, benefiting other trading partners in the Pacific region (JSCFADT 2021). Tongan diplomat Curtis Tu'ihalangingie stated that Tongan-Australian trade was 'one-way' and that 'restrictions and strict specifications imposed by Australia on our farmers coupled with our limited technology prevent us from fully accessing the Australian market' (quoted in JSCFADT 2021). Non-tariff barriers to trade include high shipping costs, complex shipping routes, time-consuming and costly biosecurity checks, high production costs, and regulatory barriers (SAME 2015).

Australia naturally engages in trade agreements by prioritising its own interests. After actively opposing the Pacific Islands region's first attempt at a regional trade agreement, Australia participated in the successive Pacific Agreement on Common Economic Relations (PACER) Plus. While ostensibly a free trade agreement, PICs requested that it be development-centric and address structural factors hindering trade. A side agreement on labour mobility was eventually negotiated and PICs signed the agreement. However, PNG and Fiji refused to join PACER Plus, stating concerns that PICs faced a 'net loss', and criticising limited development support amending structural imbalances (Morgan 2020). PNG and Fiji's disinclination to join severely affected the agreement, and their absence 'significantly diminishes the utility of the agreement for Australian business' (JSCT 2018, p. iv). The inability to successfully negotiate the inclusion of its two largest Pacific trading partners – to Australia's detriment – illustrated an inability to reimagine relationships away from the incumbent logic.

Australia's economic statecraft with PICs does not mirror Australia's economic statecraft elsewhere. The Australian Government established eight councils to focus on advocacy, outreach, support for business, education, cultural initiatives, grants, and exchange programmes with ASEAN, India, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Arab, and Latin American states. There are unofficial Australia–PNG, Australia–Fiji and Australia–Pacific Business Councils; however, they are neither supported financially nor attended by the Australian Government. They are chambers of commerce, not-for-profits run by local businesses with existing direct trading relationships in Australia – not official government-sponsored business forums. The Australian Government financially contributes to the PIF's trade and investment arm, Pacific Trade Invest (PTI), but notably 'capacity building and upskilling is a cornerstone PTI Australia's work', not advocacy (PTI 2023). This indicates the habitual preconception that Pacific Islanders are currently incapable of trading *with* Australia and require capacity-building – avoiding that Australian structural non-tariff barriers impede trade.

As discussed in Chapter 2, PICs successfully used diplomatic statecraft to lobby the Australian government on regulatory barriers, influencing them to allow the importation of kava. Acknowledging the success of diplomatic statecraft for economic outcomes and the welcome break from the colonial logic of habit, we wonder if the Australian Government had in place structures for economic statecraft with PICs (as with elsewhere), would kava negotiations have taken so long? And, what is the next 'kava' that the Australian public cannot purchase because of regulatory barriers hindering Pacific imports? Morgan (2020) suggests the potential of single-source chocolate and coffee, ginger, vanilla, spices, hardwood timbers, and coconut oils.

Aid

With the wave of Pacific independence between the 1960s and 1980s, Australia's policy response shifted towards ODA – the majority to PNG. However, ODA that actually benefits Australia is termed 'boomerang aid' (Fernandes 2018, p. 177). During the colonial period, over half of PNG's budget paid expatriate Australian government officials' salaries to administer PNG government departments (Torrey 1974). Today, large portions of ODA are still spent on Australians' salaries and living costs, with Australian government officials embedded into Pacific public agencies as part of Australia's statecraft. In the 2005 PNG Enhanced Cooperation Programme budget (AUD$800m), just AUD$55m went to the Royal PNG Constabulary, while the rest went on Australian Federal Police operating costs (AUD$395) and salaries (AUD$340m) (quoted in Fernandes 2018, p. 177). One Australian working in the Pacific over four years is estimated to cost approximately AUD$2m (Taylor and Middleby 2023). Pacific public institutions are notoriously under-resourced with few (usually underpaid) personnel – investments in these institutions to employ more local staff at higher rates may assist with sustainability, mitigate

risks of corruption, resourcing, and/or oversaturation. Pacific Islanders are disconcerted that their needs have been used to justify ODA, when the majority continues to be paid to officials, consultants, and companies from donor states (Ratuva 2022). Honesty and acknowledgement that such funding is not going to Pacific Islanders might begin to address a logic of habit in which ODA is subject to donor control at significant expense, enabled by private sector profiteering.

The notion that outsiders could 'do it better' echoes colonial thinking of Pacific people being 'incapable'. International staff are paid exorbitantly compared to local wages – in PNG and Solomon Islands, international staff were paid nine times more than local staff despite similar qualifications and experience (Carr and McWha-Herman 2016; Fernandes 2018). While the disparity is acknowledged in the aid sector, the common excuse is that increasing local wages would distort the local economy, without thought to reducing international wages. Wage disparity also does not take into account Pacific peoples' capacity to address their own needs in a culturally locally appropriate way, often more effectively than international staff (Taylor and Middleby 2023; Smith, Craney and Roche 2024). Pacific people feel 'worthless and incompetent' when they are not listened to and 'bullied and disempowered' by international agencies and consultants rolling out cookie-cutter programmes (Guttenbeil-Likiliki 2022). Local capability always existed, but was really only noticed by the international community when the COVID-19 pandemic locked out donor noise that has often drowned local voices with colonial assumptions (Guttenbeil-Likiliki 2022; Smith et al. 2024).

During the colonial period, the Australian government left 'the basic needs of economic development to private Australian enterprises' (Torrey 1974, p. 2). Today, the logic of habit continues in Australian outsourcing of ODA – problematic in economic statecraft terms, as profit-driven enterprises have different priorities from the government (Taylor and Middleby 2023). Ironically, Australia is often not credited for outsourced ODA, reducing the effectiveness of its statecraft (Chapter 1). Four international companies dominate Australia's aid sector; notably Pacific-based consultants receive just 1.2% of Australia's aid contracts (Taylor and Middleby 2023). Contracts with these four companies can run into the billions (including operating costs and salaries, not simply profit), and are regular occurrences within the Australian public sector. One notable example is Palladium, an international company that between February 2018 and June 2023 ran Australia's PALM scheme for AUD$112,572,292 (AusTender 2023). When Pacific diplomats raised concerns about PALM, the Australian Government directed them to Palladium, thereby outsourcing diplomatic discussions (and thus, foreign policy)[7] to a private company. This caused significant consternation in the Pacific diplomatic community by undermining their ability to engage on a state-to-state basis, diminishing Australian statecraft.

ODA's colonial legacy has been leveraged to influence political outcomes in Australia's favour. Teaiwa (2015, p. 377) argues that 'Australia continues

to influence the economic and political affairs of its former Pacific territories' by using ODA to persuade PNG and Nauru to host offshore immigration detention centres – security and economic deals shrouded in performative 'aid'. Australia sought similar agreements with other Pacific states, but only found success in its former colonies where significant needs existed – established by colonial legacy – to be met by the ODA packages promised. Australia's economic focus is unabashedly on these facilities. Australian trade department AusTrade (2023) highlights 'economic opportunities' with the Regional Processing Centre on Manus Island at the top of its PNG market profile. These practices, however, sit poorly with Pacific people, who face the significant everyday gendered and security consequences of these centres (Rooney 2023).

Conclusion

As Australia 'stepped-up' in the Pacific Islands region since 2018, its deployment of economic tools of statecraft continues to signal that Pacific people and PICs are not viewed as genuine partners. Through a colonial logic of habit, the extraction of resources from the region – whether people or material – has largely endured in contemporary economic statecraft. Continued visa restrictions mirroring those of colonial periods; the absence of official trade forums; and ODA distribution benefiting Australian companies demonstrate the colonial logic of habit that Australia has formed. In an age where 'states have to relate to each other in much more complex ways', an evolution in economic tools of statecraft should be considered (Gyngell and Wesley 2003, p. 244). An adjustment would require a 'sea-change in policy-making mindsets' from one of colonial resource extraction, to one of genuine partnership (Prantl and Goh 2022, p. 467). To reimagine relationships and develop genuine partnerships, Australia should demonstrate an appreciation for the abilities and contribution of Pacific people, by centring Pacific people's agency in foreign policy towards the region. Once the mindset shifts, there are opportunities to reimagine relations by establishing official trade councils, opening visa opportunities like the PEV, and valuing local actors in ODA.

As Wong (2023) herself remarked, 'we are not hostages to history. We decide what to do with the present'. The PEV and kava are the first steps towards breaking the colonial logic of habit, what comes next?

Notes

1 An earlier version of this chapter was published as M Koro and H McNeill (2024) 'Challenging colonial logics of habit in Australia's economic statecraft with Pacific Islands', *Asia and the Pacific Policy Studies* 11(3) https://doi.org/10.1002/app5.398
2 Notably, AP4D's (2020, p. 16) list also included 'perceptions, history and memory' of Australia, including 'historic connections to the Pacific'.
3 Following Japanese occupation during WWII, Australia administered Papua and New Guinea together as Papua New Guinea from 1949 to 1975.
4 See Ratuva (2022) for criticism of this colonial label.

5 Recognising that the Asian economic boom was heavily reliant on a formerly-colonial consumer clientele.
6 Australia's Seasonal Worker Programme was piloted in 2008 and expanded in 2011; the Pacific Labour Scheme was established in 2018; both schemes merged into PALM in 2022.
7 Outsourcing foreign policy may also have wider effects: potential government partners who want to work alongside Australia in the Pacific may consider that they would have less oversight if a project is outsourced, and be less willing to engage.

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5 Australia and the United States' defence diplomacy[1]

Joanne Wallis, Quentin Hanich, Michael Rose, and Alan Tidwell

Introduction

As Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) leaders identified in their 2018 Boe Declaration on Regional Security, Pacific Island countries (PICs) face a range of security challenges, including 'human security, humanitarian assistance', 'environmental security', 'disasters and climate change', and 'a dynamic geopolitical environment', for which they need 'regional cooperation and support' (PIF 2018). Partner states have long conducted defence diplomacy in the region aimed, at least in part, at helping PICs to respond to these security challenges. Defence diplomacy is often not well-understood (Drab 2018), partly because diplomacy is commonly seen only as the domain of civilian diplomats, and partly because there is scepticism about its value (Taylor et al. 2014). While diplomacy has traditionally been understood as the role of civilian diplomats, defence diplomacy involves the peaceful use of defence resources to pursue foreign and strategic policy objectives. Therefore, defence diplomacy does not include offensive military operations, but it can involve military ones for peaceful purposes, such as humanitarian and disaster relief (HADR).

Defence diplomacy is generally viewed as an effective tool of statecraft as it can enhance donors' influence by creating positive opinions of them and by improving capacity in recipient states in ways that benefit donors' strategic interests. For example, in its 2021 report, the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade's 'Inquiry into Australia's defence relationships with Pacific Island nations' recommended that Australia's Defence Cooperation Program (DCP) and the Pacific Maritime Security Programme be expanded given its perceived success (Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs Defence and Trade 2021). But defence diplomacy can also compel target states and actors to change their behaviour.

This chapter assesses the nature and effectiveness of defence diplomacy as a tool of statecraft, with a focus on Australia and the United States (US). Australia has long been the partner state with the most significant involvement in security and defence in the southern Pacific Islands region, with the US playing the dominant role in the northern Pacific through Hawai'i, as well as through its territories and freely associated states. This chapter analyses the

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following different elements of their defence diplomacy: defence presence; defence cooperation and assistance; developing people-to-people links; maritime surveillance and support; crisis response, including humanitarian and disaster relief and stabilisation operations; and minilateral and bilateral arrangements. It concludes by arguing that defence diplomacy often delivers for PICs, but some of what is delivered could be done outside of the defence realm.

Defence presence

The most tangible example of Australia and the US's defence diplomacy is their defence presence in the Pacific Islands region. The US has compact of free association relationships with the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM) (since 1986), the Republic of Marshall Islands (RMI) (since 1986), and the Republic of Palau (since 1994), under which it is obliged to defend those states. While the US has 'full authority and responsibility' for external security, including the establishment of military bases, the three PICs retain domestic autonomy and independence. In exchange, the compact states receive economic assistance, and their citizens have the unimpeded right to live and work in the US. In 1986, the Northern Mariana Islands opted for commonwealth status with the US, joining Guam and American Samoa as unincorporated territories of the US.

Facilitated by its relationships, the US has an extensive defence presence, with Joint Region Marianas, consisting of US Naval Base Guam and Andersen Air Force Base on Guam, and the Ronald Reagan Ballistic Missile Defense test site on Kwajalein Atoll in the RMI. In 2012 the government announced that the Space Fence radar site would be built on Kwajalein Island in the RMI to provide 'Space Surveillance Network capability'. This was in addition to the existing US Army Garrison Kwajalein Atoll. Some US forces from Okinawa in Japan have also relocated to Guam in response to Okinawans protesting the continued presence of large numbers of US military personnel (and cases of violence by US military personnel against the local population) and reflecting that Guam is the site of Joint Region Marianas. THAAD, a ballistic missile defence system, was also added to the base in Guam.

In November 2018, the US announced that it would partner with Australia and PNG to redevelop the Lombrum naval base on Manus Island in PNG. The US had established a base on Manus Island in 1944, at the height of its Second World War offensive, which recognised its important strategic location as an entry point to the Pacific Islands region (Beazley 2017). After the war, the base was used by Australia, which was the colonial administrator until PNG's independence in 1975. The base was to be redeveloped in the context of Australia's Pacific Maritime Security Programme, under which patrol boats and assistance are provided to PICs to help them police their maritime territories.

In January 2022, it was reported that the Pentagon had designated Palau as the possible site of a new military base, with plans to build a US$197 million

Tactical Multi-Mission Over-the-Horizon Radar Transmitter Facility on Ngaraard (Malama 2022; Island Times 2023). This followed Palauan President Thomas Remengesau inviting the US to build military bases in 2020 (Indo-Pacific Defense Forum 2021). The US and FSM governments have also agreed to establish a more permanent US military presence (FSM Embassy 2021). In 2023, the US also began reclaiming a Second World War-era airfield on Tinian Island in the Commonwealth of Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI) as part of its operational strategy of Agile Combat Employment, which calls for locating aircraft in as many locations as possible in the western Pacific to avoid enemy missile strikes (Nakamura 2023). It also plans to have a dedicated US Coast Guard[2] vessel operating in the region from early 2024.

In contrast, Australia does not have a permanent defence presence in the Pacific Islands region. However, as described below, it does have a network of defence personnel throughout the region who are involved in delivering its Pacific Maritime Security Programme. And Australia frequently has an episodic defence presence through its HADR and other crisis responses, particularly stabilisation operations. For example, it deployed 350 defence personnel to Solomon Islands to assist with security for the Pacific Games in November and December 2023. This reflects Australia's stated desire to be the region's 'security partner of choice' (Albanese 2022).

Australia's efforts to embed itself as the region's preferred security partner have been bolstered by several bilateral defence and security arrangements it has signed in the region since 2017. Australia signed a security treaty with Solomon Islands in 2017; security partnership MOUs with Nauru and Tuvalu in 2017; a *vuvale* (friendship) partnership with Fiji in 2019 and a status of forces agreement in 2022; a comprehensive strategic and economic partnership with PNG in 2020 and a security agreement in 2023; a bilateral security agreement with Vanuatu in 2022; and a security treaty, the 'Falepili Union', with Tuvalu in 2023.

To build on its already extensive defence presence in the northern part of the region, in May 2023 the US signed a defence cooperation agreement (DCA) with PNG. When the agreement was publicly released in mid-June 2023 it was revealed that it granted 'unimpeded access' to US personnel for 'mutually agreed activities' to several sea- and airports, including the Lombrum Naval base (Swanston and Srinivasan 2023). The agreement also gave US authorities the 'exclusive right to exercise criminal jurisdiction over US personnel', which may give rise to a legal challenge, as the constitutionality of immunities granted to Australian police personnel in 2004 was successfully challenged in the PNG Supreme Court in 2005. US defence analysts praised the agreement's potential as a 'way for the U.S. military to gain influence on the island and shift military policy to fall more in line with that of the U.S.' (Allen, Machain and Flynn 2023). But Papuan New Guinean students protested after the agreement was signed, and others expressed concern about the scope of access that the US was being given (RNZ 2023). Papua New Guinean academic Henry Ivarature described the scope of the agreement as

'unbelievable' and added that it 'reads to me as if PNG has sold itself and its sovereignty to the US' (Swanston and Srinivasan 2023).

In the context of US DCAs, the agreement can be seen quite differently. The same year that the US and PNG negotiated the DCA, the US also negotiated a similar agreement with Sweden. The PNG/US DCA and the Sweden/US DCA accomplish very similar things. Both agreements:

- Define facilities and areas within the host nation to be made available for US forces and activities;
- Grant US forces access to and use of agreed facilities and areas for activities like training, exercises, and support operations;
- Allow US forces to preposition and store defence equipment, supplies, and materiel at agreed facilities and areas, underscoring the strategic logistics and readiness aspect of the cooperation;
- State the principle that US personnel are to respect the laws of the host nation and the commitment of the US to exercise jurisdiction over its personnel in certain cases;
- Facilitate the smooth entry, exit, and movement of US personnel and contractors, highlighting exemptions from certain local migration requirements;
- Articulate the commitment to the security and protection of US forces, with the host nation taking necessary measures to ensure safety while recognising the US forces' right to self-defence and operational security measures; and
- Contain provisions for handling claims arising from the activities under the agreement and dispute resolution mechanisms emphasising cooperation and diplomatic engagement.

The response to the US-PNG DCA highlights sensitivities in the region. Indeed, in Vanuatu there was a successful vote of no-confidence against the government, in part because it signed a security agreement with Australia (although domestic political dynamics were more influential). This suggests that bilateral agreements can have destabilising impacts on domestic politics in their Pacific signatory states. Notably, both Vanuatu and PNG are long-term members of the Non-Aligned Movement and have strong domestic cultures of non-alignment that reflect this.

There is also the risk of fracturing regional cooperative security mechanisms, particularly those facilitated by the PIF. Regional cooperation was critical to efforts to reject China's April 2022 efforts to secure agreement to its proposed regional economic and security pacts. Samoan Prime Minister Fiamē Naomi Mata'afa led the regional push against China's efforts to pursue a broader regional security and development agreement, arguing that regional matters must instead be discussed at the PIF (Polu 2022). As Fiamē observed: 'you cannot have a regional agreement when the region hasn't met to discuss it. And to be called to have that discussion and have an expectation that there would be a comprehensive decision or outcome was something that we

could not agree to' quoted in (Wong 2022). This suggests that there might be value in Australia and the US supporting the PIF's efforts to enhance regional cooperative security mechanisms as an alternative to any future Chinese attempts to secure bilateral or regional security agreements in the region.

Defence cooperation and assistance

Much of Australia's defence diplomacy in the Pacific Islands region is conducted via its longstanding DCP, which has operated since most PICs became independent between the late 1960s and early 1980s. Worth A$227 million in 2022–2023 (Watt 2022), the DCP involves Australia:

- providing assistance to the defence forces of PNG, Tonga, and Fiji and the paramilitary elements of police forces in other PICs;
- engaging in humanitarian and development projects (particularly civil engineering);
- providing a range of education and training opportunities; and
- engaging in personnel exchanges, strategic dialogues, visits, and exercises with Pacific defence and security forces.

Recently the DCP has expanded to undertake some major defence infrastructure projects. In early 2022, Australia completed work on redeveloping the Blackrock Peacekeeping and Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief Camp for the Republic of Fiji Military Forces. Australia is also constructing a Maritime Essential Services Centre in Fiji, upgrading the Cook and Tiroas barracks for the Vanuatu Police Force, and constructing border posts in Solomon Islands.

The DCP is not presented as an aid program, but instead as 'means of facilitating cooperative activities between the Australian Defence Force (ADF) and regional security forces' (Merchant 1989). The DCP has also been distinguished by the fact that it has sought to 'tailor… engagement to meet the national priorities, capacity considerations and cultural imperatives of recipient countries identified through 'annual officers' level defence talks and in-country Defence Attaché networks' (Department of Defence 2020, p. 3), rather than those identified in Canberra. Defence has also established an ADF Pacific Support Team to enhance its engagement with Pacific Island countries about their needs. While Australia's development assistance program has shifted to factor in recipient priorities over the last two decades, that approach has been baked into the DCP since its inception.

The DCP is often seen as an effective tool of Australian statecraft because it helps to strengthen the capacity of regional security forces, improves Australia's capacity to work with those forces, and contributes to building strong 'strong people-to-people links with regional militaries at the tactical, operational and strategic levels'. In its submission to the 2021 Joint Standing Committee 'Inquiry on Australia's defence relationships with Pacific Island nations', Defence

stated that the DCP supports Australia's national interests and defence relationships in the Pacific Islands region (Department of Defence 2020, p. 3). This view was supported by several submissions to the inquiry (Wallis 2020; High Commission of Tonga 2020).

But there are concerns about the DCP. The first is that it has, at times, supported militaries that repress their populations or commit human rights abuses. This was most obvious during the Bougainville crisis, when donated helicopters were used by the PNG Defence Force (PNGDF) to undertake offensive operations against Bougainvilleans. The second is that there have been questions about spending under the DCP and the management of individual projects (Australian National Audit Office 2001). Third, the links between the DCP and defence strategic guidance are at times unclear and the strategic benefits of the DCP are often assumed, rather than demonstrated (Australian National Audit Office 2001).

Defence diplomacy

While it is hard to immediately identify the benefits of defence education and training opportunities – since they do not generate anything concrete – their value in cultivating positive opinions of their donors amongst their recipients can be immense. For example, when selecting Pacific participants, the ADF makes efforts to identify and target potential future leaders so that it can expose them to Australian training, invite them to conferences, and provide other opportunities for them to get to know Australia and their counterpart Australian personnel. This reflects a recognition that longstanding relationships can start with early professional military education and then develop over the years through further education, training, exercises, and deployments (Wallis 2017). This can be compared to civilian public servants, including diplomats, who tend to be generalists and therefore do not necessarily get the same opportunity for repeat visits or deployments.

These people-to-people links are enhanced by ADF members embarking on multiple deployments to the Pacific Islands region, helping them to further develop their relationships. The ADF has also developed 'soft power' defence diplomacy strategies based on sports such as rugby union and rugby league, and visits to the region. For example, in August 2020 Australia docked HMAS Choules and Huon in Port Vila and staged flypasts by Royal Australian Airforce Super Hornets to celebrate the 40th anniversary of Vanuatu's independence. But while such visits may provide an opportunity for people-to-people links to develop, they are primarily a demonstration of Australian military capability – and presence. Similarities between the 'cultures' of defence forces also help to build relationships: while there may be some cultural differences between Australia and PICs, all defence (and many security) forces share similar structures, expectations of behaviour, career progression, and standard operating procedures.

The value of the people-to-people links was illustrated during the INTERFET deployment to Timor-Leste following the 1999 referendum on

its political future. Members of the ADF and Indonesian military were able to draw on their familiarity with each other from joint-training and exchange programs to defuse tense situations (Stockings 2022). Connections between Australian military personnel and their Pacific counterparts go even deeper.

However, personal relationships can have limits, as was demonstrated after the 2006 coup in Fiji. Australian personnel who had developed close relationships with coup-leader Frank Bainimarama were unable to persuade him to abandon the coup. And even if the relationships between individual military officers are good, if there are strategic tensions between their two countries they might not make much difference. For example, in 2014 Australian forces cooperated with Chinese forces in the search for Malaysian Airlines flight MH370, but given how much relations between the two countries have now cooled, any goodwill that was generated has dissipated.

Maritime surveillance and support

Since the late 1980s, one of the most important aspects of Australia's defence diplomacy has been the provision of patrol boats to PICs. As islands and archipelagos, PICs have extensive exclusive economic zones (EEZs) under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea: combined, they cover approximately 30 569 000 km^2 of the Pacific Ocean, in contrast to their combined landmass of 552 789 km^2 (84 per cent of which is PNG). The Pacific Ocean is home to the world's largest remaining stocks of tuna, providing over half of the world's catches of tuna (Ruaia, Gu'urau and Wheatley 2023). Many PICs depend on revenue from fishing licences and access agreements. In many places, commercial fishing boats are a significant source of employment. Small scale local fisheries also supplement nutrition and household income.

From the late 1980s, the security of PICs' maritime territories was challenged by rapidly increasing fishing activity by industrial vessels from distant-water fishing nations, in particular Japan, Taiwan, the US, and South Korea. Over the past 20 years boats from the People's Republic of China have become increasingly active in this area. These distant-water fishing vessels, particularly longline vessels, frequently breached their licence agreements and mis-reported their catches. Corruption and governance concerns also posed significant challenges to the management and governance of fisheries (Hanich and Tsamenyi 2009). While illegal fishing by unlicensed vessels is not considered to be a significant threat, ongoing problems with misreporting and licence violations continue to be a challenge, costing the region A$333.49 million in estimated losses, though this is an improvement on previous estimated losses of A$616.11 million in 2016 (MRAG Asia Pacific, 2021).

Australia's initial response to these challenges was the Pacific Patrol Boat Program. This program responded to a 1979 request by PICs for Australian and New Zealand defence experts to assess their surveillance needs and in Australia's prioritisation of policing PICs' EEZs (Department of Defence 1994). The Pacific Patrol Boat Program consisted of 22 boats that were

donated to 12 PICs between 1987 and 1995, with the first boat delivered to PNG. To ensure that the boats were easy to operate, locally sustainable, and to minimise costs, they were built to commercial standards, which also ensured that they could be supported by commercial supply and repair organisations (Bergin and Bateman, 1999).

In 2009 the Australian Government announced that the Pacific Patrol Boat Program would be replaced by the Pacific Maritime Security Programme (Rudd 2009), which was confirmed in the 2013 Defence White Paper (Department of Defence 2013). The Pacific Maritime Security Programme involves 23 Guardian-class patrol boats being donated to 12 PICs and Timor-Leste between 2018 and 2024. It also includes a program of contracted aerial ocean surveillance and the secondment of regional personnel to the Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA) to help enhance regional coordination. Australia and the FFA also increasingly cooperate with Canada and other national agencies and non-government organisations to access satellite monitoring and surveillance platforms.

Under both programs the patrol boats have focused on fisheries enforcement, although most boats are used by the police rather than fisheries agencies, and in Fiji, PNG, and Tonga they are operated by the defence forces. The boats are also used for search and rescue, humanitarian assistance, and medical evacuations. The local crews are brought to Australia for training at the Australian Maritime College. Technical and operational support is provided by 25 in-country Royal Australian Navy maritime surveillance advisers, who have patrol boat experience, and technical advisers, who are senior sailors with marine engineering or electrical specialisations. Support is often also provided to purchase fuel for the boats and build the infrastructure required to support them, such as the construction of wharf facilities, accommodation for crews and their families, and maintenance. Australia is currently upgrading wharf infrastructure in 13 PICs to ensure that they can safely operate and maintain the new, larger Guardian-class patrol boats. The most well-publicised upgrade is of Lombrum Naval Base on Manus Island in PNG, on which Australia is partnering with PNG and the US.

These programs are seen as effective tools of statecraft to support Australia's strategic interests. They give Australia a strategic presence in the region, particularly through ADF maritime surveillance and technical advisers stationed in recipient states. These personnel build personal networks and gain a 'detailed understanding of the marine environment of the region and normally play an important role in the development of maritime security and surveillance policies in the recipient countries' (Bergin and Bateman 1999). Indeed, these programs have effectively established an Australian-controlled network of maritime surveillance in the region, which has enabled Australia to gain situational awareness throughout the maritime domain (Wallis 2017).

As with the DCP, an important aspect of these programs is that they represent a partnership between Australia and PICs, with Australia playing a 'facilitating role', while PICs operate the boats (McCann 2013). PICs report that

they appreciate that, alongside other measures such as the *Niue Treaty Subsidiary Agreement* and increasingly effective measures against IUU fishing, these programs have helped them to protect their maritime resources and, in turn, increase their fisheries revenue. In addition, more than 16,000 people are currently employed in the fisheries industry (Virdin et al. 2016). These programs have also helped in relation to other security challenges, including search and rescue, medical evacuations, transporting ballot boxes during elections, and, most significantly, in HADR (although there has been criticism that the boats are also used for non-security-related tasks, such as transporting VIPs). Recipient states have also said that they appreciate the training that is provided to support the program (Bergin and Bateman 1999).

PICs are accordingly committed to these programs, reflected by the relatively high number of sea days that they manage to achieve with their boats, often at significant human and financial expense. Although the number of sea days that PICs manage to achieve (36 days a year on patrol out of an average of 55 days a year at sea) is lower than similar boats operated by Australia and New Zealand (100 days per year), it can be challenging for PICs to maintain and manage the boats, which has also led to the cost of the program overrunning at Australia's expense (Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee 2010). Indeed, Australia anticipated these challenges when it was planning these programs, which is why it adopted a 'package deal' approach, whereby these programs involve training crews, logistics support, advisers, assistance with maintenance, and, in some cases, fuel costs (Bergin and Bateman 1999).

These programs have also facilitated regional cooperation, including through the FFA, which coordinates policy advice and provides expertise and technical support to PIF members, and to which Australia is a major donor. In support of regional approaches to surveillance, Australia supports the FFA Regional Fisheries Surveillance Centre and annual regional maritime law enforcement operations such as Operation Kurukuru. This inaugural operation focused on countering illegal fishing was first conducted in 2004. The operation has continued, with its scope being expanded to maritime law enforcement more broadly and participation enhanced by whole-of-government contributions.

Australia is also a party to the 2017 *Niue Treaty Subsidiary Agreement*, under which some members of the FFA agree to engage in cooperative surveillance and enforcement activities through the sharing of research and information and joint operations. Australia has also funded the Pacific Fusion Centre in Vanuatu, which facilitates research, information-sharing, and coordination between PIF members to address security challenges, including in the maritime domain. Australia has also supported PICs in integrating their maritime law enforcement activities, by funding in-country training, workshops, consultations, and legislative reviews.

Reflecting the perceived success of these programs, as well as the importance of the maritime domain in the Pacific Islands region, Australia is not

alone in conducting 'patrol boat diplomacy'. Japan is the most active in this space after Australia and has provided boats to Palau and FSM, with support provided both through its national agencies, and the philanthropic Nippon Foundation. Taiwan has also donated patrol boats (significantly smaller than those provided by Australia) to Tuvalu, Palau, and Nauru.

Although China has donated patrol boats to Nigeria, the Philippines, and Sierra Leone, it has not yet donated any to PICs. It is perhaps telling that the two Chinese patrol boats purchased by Timor-Leste in the mid-2000s are currently inoperable due to lack of maintenance. This can be contrasted to the Australian approach, which involves not just the provision of boats, but also maintenance and sustainment support. However, Australia's programs have not been without challenges. More recently, there were defects in the exhaust, sewage, and safety systems of the first 15 new *Guardian*-class boats delivered to PICs. Some of these boats were out of service while they were being rectified.

Australia has also extended maritime surveillance cooperation since 2018, including information-sharing, supported regional multilateral maritime surveillance activities, and coordinated surveillance support to PICs from Australia, France, New Zealand, and the US through the Quadrilateral Defence Coordination Group (the 'Pacific Quad'); the FRANZ Arrangement between Australia, France, and New Zealand; and the 2012 Joint Statement of Strategic Partnership between Australia and France. The purpose of the Pacific Quad is to 'promote security and stability through multilateral activities' including regional surveillance operations on illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing, supporting the work of the FFA, transnational crime maritime interdictions, and coordinating maritime security assistance and humanitarian assistance.

The Australian Federal Police (AFP) has also been involved in maritime security assistance, providing small craft for local policing to Vanuatu, as well as support to the Pacific Transnational Crime Coordination Centre and Transnational Crime Units through the Pacific Islands Chiefs of Police.

The US Coast Guard and Navy see their shiprider program as the 'flagship of Theatre Security Cooperation (TSC)' with PICs (Pruett 2024). Operation Blue Pacific, a multi-year effort, is 'an overarching multi-mission Coast Guard endeavour to promote security, safety, sovereignty, and economic prosperity in Oceania' (Muir 2024). Since 2022, eight Coast Guard cutters have engaged in operations to counter illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing (IUU), human trafficking, narcotics trafficking, and other transnational crimes. In addition to promoting cooperation with shiprider signatories, Operation Blue Pacific creates opportunities for cooperation between allies in the region. The Coast Guard medium endurance cutter, Harriet Lane, called into Cairns to pick up Australian Border Force (ABF) personnel for visits to PNG and Vanuatu. Neil Horne, ABF Deputy Commander Maritime Border Command observed that 'The shiprider program promotes cooperation and information sharing between the two agencies and demonstrates a commitment to maritime security in the region' (USCG 2024).

Other forms of defence assistance

The ADF provides other forms of assistance outside the DCP, most notably the disposal of unexploded Second World War ordinance as part of Operation Render Safe. The ADF also participates in military exercises with some PICs, which help 'promote interoperability and familiarity between armed forces' (Department of Defence 2020, p. 5). For example, the ADF has conducted joint exercises with the PNGDF since PNG's independence, including Exercise Puk, involving Australian and Papua New Guinean engineers. In 2013, the inaugural South Pacific Defence Ministers' Meeting established a Cooperative Exercise Framework, known as Povai Endeavour, which provides a coordinating mechanism for exercises in the region.

Similarly, the US has engaged in military exercises. Starting in 2021, the PNGDF and the US Army Pacific have engaged in Tamiok Strike in both Port Moresby and Lae to enhance interoperability and readiness in both infantry and engineering. In 2023, elements of the US Army's 105th Cavalry (constituted from the Wisconsin National Guard) and the 728th Military Police Battalion worked with PNGDF's 2nd Battalion, Royal Pacific Infantry Regiment. In 2022, Australia, Fiji, New Zealand, the United Kingdom (UK), and the US engaged in the military exercise Cartwheel. In 2023, Cartwheel was repeated, without the UK's participation. As with Tamiok Strike, the US contingent was drawn from a National Guard, this time from Nevada. Tamiok Strike and Cartwheel build on relationships growing out of US State Partnership Programs (SPP).

SPP focusses on 'military-to-military engagements in support of defence security goals but also leverages whole-of-society relationships and capabilities to facilitate broader interagency and corollary engagements spanning military, government, economic and social spheres' (United States National Guard, undated). There are currently 106 countries participating in SPP relationships, including four PICs: Fiji, Tonga, and Samoa have partnered with the Nevada National Guard; and PNG partners with the Wisconsin National Guard. While most SPP relationships are built on military-to-military relationships, the Nevada-Samoa partnership stands out. Samoa, while not having a military, has nonetheless partnered with the Nevada National Guard to build greater capacity in 'disaster preparedness, disaster management, humanitarian assistance, climate change response, search and rescue response, [and] law enforcement…' (Faiffo 2024).

Washington also engages in security cooperation capacity building. In 2020, the US spent roughly \$2.8 million funding 98 enrolees from PICs to attend US-run programs.[3] The US operates an array of security cooperation capacity-building programs, including those of particular interest in the Pacific Islands region: International Military Education and Training (IMET); International Narcotics and Law Enforcement (INL) programs; Nonproliferation, Antiterrorism, Demining, and Related Programs (NADR); Peacekeeping Operations; as well as funding attendance at US military academies. In addition

to capacity building, these courses also enhance people-to-people links. Perhaps one of the most striking illustrations of this came shortly after Sitiveni Rabuka of Fiji became prime minister, when he attended an alumni function at the Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies (APCSS) in Honolulu.

Humanitarian and disaster relief

Disaster has been a driver of defence cooperation and diplomacy and HADR plays an important role in defence diplomacy in the Pacific Islands region. While Pacific Islanders are highly resilient and have been finding ways to adapt to social, political, and environmental change for centuries, PICs face capacity limitations in their security institutions and emergency response mechanisms. Australia and other partners have been reminded of this by the successful localisation of HADR in Vanuatu in 2020 and Tonga in 2022 necessitated by COVID-19-related border closures (Vanuatu Association of NGOs and Humanitarian Advisory Group, 2020; Pacific Resilience Partnership, 2021).

It has been claimed that HADR offers Australia an opportunity to conduct ‘disaster diplomacy’ (Powles 2016). This was particularly important in respect to Cyclone Winston in Fiji in 2016, which offered an important opportunity for Australia to rebuild its relationship with Fiji after the 2006 coup. Australian personnel working with the Fijian military forces was ‘welcomed by both communities’, as they shared a ‘strong collective sense of purpose’ (David Johnston quoted in Navy News 2016). Australia’s assistance encouraged then-Fijian Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama to declare that Fijians ‘will always be grateful’ and that he wanted to ‘reset the direction of our relationship and work together to confront our many challenges in the region and the world’ (Bainimarama 2016). However, this example also illustrates the complexities of defence diplomacy. While Australia’s support to Fiji helped to rebuild its relationship with Bainimarama and his government, it also bolstered the image of that government domestically.[4] Given that Bainimarama had led a coup, and that his government had implemented policies that arguably restricted democratic freedoms, this meant that Australia’s assistance had unintended consequences.

Australia currently faces the mixed blessing of a growing number of partners seeking to aid PICs. It cooperates well with France and New Zealand under the longstanding FRANZ Arrangement. This demonstrates that, when that assistance comes from partners that Australia has close relations with, it can involve valuable opportunities for coordination and burden-sharing. For example, to respond to the January 2022 Hunga Tonga–Hunga Ha‘apai eruption and tsunami, Australia, New Zealand, the US, and Fiji coordinated their sizable response through an ad hoc International Coordination Cell established by the ADF at Headquarters Joint Operations Command. In contrast, China elected to remain outside the cell and mounted its own extensive response. This resulted in competition for pier-side support, access to tarmacs

and flight schedules, as well as poorly coordinated donated equipment. Today, 75 eight-tonne inappropriate and unwanted one-bedroom prefabricated homes donated by China sit gathering salt spray on the wharf in Nuku'alofa (Wallis, Powles and McNeill 2022). The potential for friction between China and Australia and its partners was circumvented in this case by the fact that most assistance was delivered by contactless means, to limit the introduction of COVID-19. But given the increasing frequency of natural disasters in the region due to climate change, it is only a matter of time before defence personnel from these states are deployed to deliver humanitarian relief in the same geographical area. That could raise serious coordination challenges, with potentially adverse consequences for the host PICs and for the personnel delivering assistance.

HADR is also important in US defence diplomacy in the region. The US Navy and Coast Guard have actively participated in HADR, such as in response to drought in Kiribati and FSM and following the 2022 Hunga Tonga–Hunga Ha'apai eruption and tsunami. The Pacific Partnership is an annual humanitarian effort, growing out of efforts at relief coordination following the 2004 tsunami in Indonesia. Since 2006, the Pacific Partnership has engaged in defence and medical diplomacy across both Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands region. An anchor to the Pacific Partnership has been the USNS Mercy, a 1,000-bed hospital ship. Military personnel from Australia, Canada, Chile, Japan, New Zealand, South Korea, and the UK participated in Pacific Partnership 23 in 2023 (Arthur 2023; Mahadzir 2024). In addition to stops in Southeast Asia, they visited Samoa, Palau, PNG, and Fiji, where they completed 300 surgeries and 7,000 dental procedures; distributed more than 6,000 prescription eyeglasses [and] accumulated nearly 4,000 man-hours in construction projects' (Mahadzir 2024).

As with all HADR efforts, donor countries must balance the costs of responding to emergencies with investments that protect before the emergency strikes. By way of analogy, HADR is like cleaning up after an accident, whereas wearing a seatbelt reduces the need to clean up in the first place. Sums spent in the name of defence and medical diplomacy might be better invested in bolstering Pacific Islanders' capacity, rather than backfilling weak infrastructure.

Minilateral arrangements

Beyond the longstanding partner arrangements like the FRANZ and Pacific Quad, there are a range of other minilateral defence arrangements in the region that involve Australia, the US, and PICs:

- The South Pacific Defence Ministers' Meeting is an annual defence-specific forum that provides an opportunity for Pacific defence ministers to discuss regional security challenges and share experiences.
- The South West Pacific Heads of Maritime Forces meeting is an annual meeting to discuss maritime security.

- The Joint Heads of Pacific Security meeting engages with heads of Pacific security agencies, which includes defence, police, customs, and immigration to shape the regional security agenda.
- In 2023 the Indo-Pacific Chiefs of Defense Conference was also held in the Pacific for the first time, in Fiji.

These defence arrangements provide an opportunity for Australia and the US to express their support for PICs and to 'identify how best to collaborate and coordinate our efforts' with them and other partners (Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade 2021, pp. 14–15).

Conclusion

Defence diplomacy can be an effective tool of statecraft. Through capacity building, people-to-people links, infrastructure improvement, and HADR it can benefit PICs and help to build positive relationships between them, Australia, and the US. This can potentially generate influence for Australia and the US (and other partner states) if their defence diplomacy shapes PICs' beliefs, attitudes, and/or opinions about them in positive ways and increases the likelihood that they are perceived as security 'partners of choice'. However, greater consideration is required on the uniquely 'defence' oriented nature of defence diplomacy. While the pragmatic reason that defence forces and institutions are usually well-funded and have the greatest logistical capability means that they have taken the lead to tackle a range of security issues, it is unclear whether some might be better provided by civilian agencies. This is particularly the case in an atmosphere of growing strategic competition. This competition not only makes many PICs feel insecure, but it also increases the likelihood of escalation should defence forces from competitor countries accidentally – or otherwise – clash. As noted above, the risk that Australian and American defence forces providing HADR in the region may have difficulties working alongside their Chinese counterparts continues to grow. This suggests that, while defence diplomacy has been an effective tool of statecraft since the Cold War, it might be time to consider whether some activities could be better conducted by Pacific Islanders (with support) or civilian Australian and American agencies.

Notes

1 An earlier version of this chapter was published as: J Wallis, Q Hanich, and M Rose 2023, *Statecraftiness: Australia's defence diplomacy in the Pacific Islands*, Stretton Institute, University of Adelaide, Adelaide.

2 Organisationally, the US Coast Guard sits in the Department of Homeland Security. The Commandant of the Coast Guard is a non-member attendee of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Under U.S.C 14 §1 "The Coast Guard, established January 28, 1915, shall be a military service and a branch of the armed forces of the United States at all times."

3 Data compiled by authors, drawn from the United States Department of State and Department of Defense, "Foreign Military Training Report", Joint Report to Congress, Fiscal Years 2019 and 2020.
4 The authors thank William Waqavakatoga for this insight.

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6 The 'Blue Pacific' strategic narrative as a tool of Pacific statecraft[1]

Joanne Wallis, Maima Koro, and Corey O'Dwyer

Introduction

This chapter considers an increasingly prominent soft power tool of statecraft being deployed in the Pacific Islands region and discussed in Chapter 1: strategic narratives. Partner states have recently deployed a series of strategic narratives in the Pacific Islands region. Since 2018 Australia has adopted the narrative of 'Pacific family'. New Zealand has sought to frame itself as being a 'Pacific nation' sharing a 'Pacific identity' with the region based on its geography and demography. And, for the last two decades, as outlined in Chapter 12, China has promoted a strategic narrative of 'South-South cooperation', to frame itself as a fellow developing country that shares experiences and interests with Pacific Island countries (PICs). Both Indonesia and France have created strategic narratives built on their Pacific territories as necessarily making them part of the region.

This chapter switches focus to analyse how PICs have created and deployed the 'Blue Pacific' strategic narrative to try to influence their partner states. It analyses the discourse and policies of partner states and international institutions and argues that they have, at times, been influenced by this narrative to both change their own narratives, and, more significantly, their substantive policies. While it acknowledges that partner states have appropriated the Blue Pacific narrative in their own attempts to influence PICs, it concludes by arguing that the Blue Pacific narrative demonstrates how less materially powerful states can leverage geopolitical competition so that their strategic narratives can influence more materially powerful partners to advance their interests and priorities.

Tarcisius Kabutaulaka (2021, p. 11) has argued that the Blue Pacific narrative has two purposes. The first is to offer 'alternative perspectives about Oceania that are empowering and strengthen regionalism' for PICs and their people. In doing this, Kabutaulaka argues that the Blue Pacific narrative 'pushes back on the negative and disempowering narratives that have dominated others' representations of Oceania' and emphasises the importance of 'collective actions' within the Pacific Ocean as central to a 'collective regional identity and cooperation' (Kabutaulaka 2021, p. 11).

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The second purpose of the Blue Pacific narrative that Kabutaulaka (2021, p. 54) identifies is strategic, whereby it seeks to facilitate 'an assertive Pacific diplomacy and empowers PICs to be more emphatic in pushing for issues that are important to them', described elsewhere as the 'new Pacific diplomacy' (Fry and Tarte 2015, p. 1). To demonstrate the effectiveness of collective Pacific diplomacy, Kabutaulaka cites examples of the 1985 *Treaty of Rarotonga*, which created the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone, and the 1982 *Nauru Agreement*, which created a regional tuna fisheries management regime and then secured funding commitments from the United States (US) under the 1988 *South Pacific Tuna Treaty*. Kabutaulaka (2021, p. 57) says that the Blue Pacific narrative draws on this history of success in 'an attempt to reiterate Pacific Islands' agency and the importance of the region's own security architecture in this changing regional order'.

We agree with Kabutaulaka that the Blue Pacific narrative has strategic purposes, and that it seeks to empower PICs and people. In this chapter, we examine how PICs have deployed the narrative as a tool of statecraft to try to influence the policies of the region's partners.

Origins of the Blue Pacific narrative

The Blue Pacific is an identity narrative that builds on longstanding Pacific understandings of the ocean as a unifying force. It was first introduced at the 2017 meeting of Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) leaders, who officially articulated the Blue Pacific narrative to represent 'a long-term Forum foreign policy commitment to act as one "Blue Continent"'(PIF 2017). PIF leaders reaffirmed that the 'Blue Pacific identity' will 'drive collective action' in their 2018 Boe Declaration on Regional Security (PIF 2018a). They then set out '*Blue Pacific Principles*', that emphasised – among other goals – 'regional priorities', a 'partnership approach', and 'collective outcomes and impact' in their 2019 communique (PIF 2019a). The Blue Pacific narrative has since been enshrined as the guiding principle for the PIF's *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent*, adopted by PIF leaders at their 2022 meeting (PIF 2022a).

When PIF leaders officially adopted the Blue Pacific narrative in 2017, they explicitly linked it to the concept of 'our sea of islands', the vision outlined by Epeli Hau'ofa (1994) in his landmark reimagining of the Pacific Islands region. Hau'ofa argued against depictions of PICs as 'too small, too poorly endowed with resources, and too isolated' to advance their development (1994, p. 151), and instead advocated the 'development of a substantial regional identity that is anchored in our common inheritance of a very considerable portion of Earth's largest body of water, the Pacific Ocean' (Hau'ofa 1998, p. 392). Indeed, Pacific peoples have historically seen their world as connected through the ocean; 'their universe comprised not only land surfaces but the surrounding oceans as far as they could traverse and exploit it' (Hau'ofa 1994, p. 152). For Hau'ofa (1998) this is what distinguishes the Pacific Islands region as being a 'sea of islands', rather than 'islands in a vast sea'. The central

role of the ocean in the Blue Pacific narrative has been emphasised by numerous Pacific leaders; Dame Meg Taylor (2019a), former Secretary General of the PIF, repeatedly stated that the narrative is based around 'our collective potential and our shared stewardship of the Pacific Ocean'. As Kabutaulaka (2021, p. 50) has observed, 'the importance of the ocean in defining Pacific identities and framing regionalism is not new', was central to the rationale for creating regional institutions such as the PIF, and later underpinned the PIF's 2014 *Framework for Pacific Regionalism* (PIF 2014, p. 1). It has also long been central to Pacific identities, with Teresia Teaiwa (2017) memorably writing that: 'We sweat and cry salt water, so we know that the ocean is really in our blood' (see also: Wendt 1976).

The use of the word 'continent' in the Blue Pacific narrative seeks to position PICs as the 'largest oceanic continent in the world', with the ocean connecting 'cultures, identities, resources and development aspirations' (Kofe 2020). This picks up on long-standing thinking; in 1949 Albert Norman (1949, p. 22) criticised the 'chauvinistic policies' of Europeans which perceived the 'waters of the South Pacific' as 'separating each 'island' group' and creating 'the impression that this society is broken up and hopelessly separated from its essential parts'. This impression was enhanced by colonisation, during which European powers ''claimed' for their own the visible peaks of land' (Norman 1949, p. 22). In response, Norman (1949, p. 22) called for the 'social reclamation of the world's seventh "continent" and its people' to 'free the land of these bonds, to restore the essential regional viewpoint and unity, to overlook the dividing waters, to see the land and its people as united'.

The Blue Pacific is also a policy narrative that seeks to galvanise and unite PICs in the face of future challenges, including geopolitical competition. As Dame Meg Taylor (2018a) asked in June 2018, 'The bigger powers, whether traditional or non-traditional, see our Blue Pacific as a strategic space for the assertion of their strategic interests. How do we, as a collective and as independent large oceanic states assert our voice into this strategic discussion?' For Taylor, and other prominent Pacific leaders such as former Samoan Prime Minister Tuila'epa Sa'ilele Malielegaoi (2018a), the Blue Pacific narrative provided the answer. Dame Meg Taylor (2018b) saw it positioning PICs to 'exercis[e] stronger strategic autonomy', 'understand…the strategic value of our region', and 'maintain our solidarity in the face of those who seek to divide us'. This idea was reinforced by the theme of the 2018 PIF leaders' meeting: 'Building a Strong Pacific: Our People, Our Islands, Our Will'. Indeed, the PIF's 2018 annual report observed that: 'The Blue Pacific concept continued to bloom in 2018, giving us a collective identity, a sense of place and a way to promote and underpin our solidarity as a strong, independent grouping of sovereign nations' (PIF 2018b). As Dame Meg Taylor (2019b) commented in 2019: 'Our political conversations and settlements must be driven by the well-being of our Blue Pacific continent and its people, not by the goals and ambitions of others'. In 2022, new PIF Secretary General Henry Puna (2022) continued this refrain, arguing that: 'if we are to truly maximise our leverage

to this increasing interest and attention on us, we must protect the sanctity of our solidarity – as Blue Pacific Continent'.

Deployment of the Blue Pacific narrative

The idea that the Blue Pacific narrative can help PICs to leverage geopolitical interest to influence partner states has been recognised by Pacific leaders. For example, in 2018 Dame Meg Taylor (2018b) argued that: 'the Blue Pacific narrative, which seeks to build an understanding, in our own terms, of the strategic value of our region and guides our political conversations towards leveraging this value to drive our development as one Blue Pacific continent'. In 2019, Dame Meg Taylor (2019b) reflected that: 'To date, the Blue Pacific narrative has been successful in building solidarity and shifting the prevailing narrative of the region as small, dependent, and vulnerable. Going forward, we need to build on this and develop concrete strategies that leverage the increased interest in our region and secure the future of the Blue Pacific'. In 2019, at a US-Pacific Islands second track dialogue, PIF Deputy Secretary General Cristelle Pratt (2019) commented that: 'Our Blue Pacific narrative… allows Pacific Islands Forum Members to access a wide range of development options from a diverse range of partners and actors that are suited to their specific requirements and needs. Our task is to find an appropriate balance between leveraging the competition between partners and ensuring peace and cooperation prevails in our Blue Pacific'. In 2020, with reference to fixing maritime boundaries that are being threatened by rising sea levels caused by climate change, 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'.

In 2022, PIF leaders endorsed the *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent*. While the 2050 Strategy is primarily intended to guide PIF members' collective action, it also intended to persuade partner states to act according to the region's interests; it explicitly states that its implementation 'will require the contribution of all stakeholders, including…. development partners' (PIF 2022a, p. 3). The Strategy identifies the key guiding values to which it expects partners to contribute as including: 'regional cooperation and our shared commitment to work together', the importance of the ocean and 'the integrity of our natural environment', 'the diversity and heritage of the Pacific', 'good governance, the full observance of democratic principles a values', 'security and wellbeing', 'innovation and creativity and respect [for] our cultural values and traditional knowledge', 'inclusivity, equity and equality', 'effective, open and honest relationships and inclusive and enduring partnerships – based on mutual accountability and respects', and the 'importance of a regional architecture that includes the Pacific Islands Forum at the apex, and that works closely with regional, multilateral, and global partners' (PIF 2022a, p. 7). Notably, the 2050 Strategy repeatedly emphasises the importance of 'nurtur[ing] collective political will' and 'deepen[ing] regionalism and solidarity' (PIF, 2022a, p. 10).

The 2050 Strategy recognises that PIF members 'occupy a vital a significant place in global strategic terms' (PIF 2022a, p. 8). Again, emphasising the potential for PICs to strategically leverage geopolitical interest, it argues that: 'to leverage this strategic and economic value and at the same time address our most significant threats, including climate change, we are deeply committed to working together whilst ensuring that our regional efforts complement the national interests of our members' (PIF 2022a, p. 9). Recognising that PICs are coming under pressure from competing partners, the 2050 Strategy emphasises that: 'as the Blue Pacific Continent we engage with our partners from a position of strength, unity and solidarity on matters of collective interest' (PIF 2022a, p. 9). And reflecting that these pressures have already contributed to threats to the unity of the PIF, the 2050 Strategy argues that: 'it is vital to our Blue Pacific Identity that we resolve any challenges or disputes in our own unique *Pacific Way* involving consensus-based decision making, whilst respecting sovereignty and the principle of non-interference in national affairs' (PIF 2022a, p. 9).

The emphasis on 'respecting sovereignty' in the 2050 Strategy reflected the concern that several Pacific leaders have expressed about geopolitical competition emerging as the primary lens through which partner states seek to engage with the region. Indeed, in 2018 Dame Meg Taylor (2018) expressed concerns about the 'recasting of geostrategic competition and cooperation under the rubric of the 'Indo-Pacific''. In a 2018 speech, Tuila'epa (Malielegaoi 2018b) described this approach 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'. As PIF Secretary General, Dame Meg Taylor (2019b) was particularly vocal in 'reject[ing] the terms of the dilemma in which the Pacific is given a choice between a "China alternative" and our traditional partners'. Implicitly admonishing partner states that have been seeking bilateral security partnerships, Dame Meg Taylor (2018b) said that PICs need 'to maintain our solidarity in the face of those who seek to divide us, particularly through the aggressive pursuit of bilateral relations'.

Regional solidarity is particularly important – and has been evident – in the response of PICs to what they collectively identify as their most significant challenge: climate change. As noted, climate change was identified by PIF leaders as an 'existential threat' in the 2018 Boe Declaration. The Blue Pacific narrative has been an important tool for rhetorical action by Pacific leaders as they attempt to drive international climate action. For example, in 2019, PIF leaders made a statement on the 'Blue Pacific's Call for Urgent Climate Action' (PIF 2019b). In 2019, PIF leaders then made a second declaration, which again argued that: 'Urgent action is needed to ensure our shared needs and interests, potential and survival of our Blue Pacific and this great Blue Planet' (PIF 2019c). In 2021, PIF leaders then made an Ocean Statement calling for 'Securing the limits of the Blue Pacific Continent against the threats of sea-level rise and climate change is the defining issue underpinning the full realisation of the Blue Pacific Continent' (PIF 2021a). In the statement after

their special retreat 2021, PIF leaders repeated their 'call for urgent action to reduce and prevent the irreversible impacts of climate change on our Ocean, reiterating that climate change is the single greatest threat to the livelihoods, security and well-being of the peoples of the Blue Pacific' (PIF 2021b). In the communique from their 2022 meeting, PIF leaders again 'recognised the opportunity of The Blue Pacific Narrative to reinforce the potential of its shared stewardship of the Pacific Ocean and to reaffirm the connections of Pacific peoples with their natural resources, environment, culture and livelihoods' (PIF 2022b).

Has the Blue Pacific narrative influenced partner countries?

While the Blue Pacific narrative has several purposes and audiences, as noted, we focus on its strategic use with respect to partner countries. In this respect, we argue that the audience that is most likely to be influenced by the Blue Pacific narrative is the US and its allied and partner states. Regardless of whether the underlying beliefs of these partners changed to reflect the Blue Pacific narrative, their statements and behaviour can still change if they feel rhetorically entrapped, that is, if they have 'publicly committed themselves to a claim in an argumentative strategy in their community' because it can be 'difficult for them to renege on this commitment' (Schimmelfennig 2003, p. 222), which can influence their policies and behaviour.

Over the last decade, the US, Australia, Japan, the United Kingdom (UK), India, and others have adopted the strategic narrative of the 'Indo-Pacific' 'primarily in response to China's rising influence and perceptions of its revisionist intentions to disrupt, re-write, or violate the so-called "rules-based order"' (Strating 2023, p. 2; Pan 2014). As the 2022 Indo-Pacific Strategy released by the US government declares: 'the Indo-Pacific faces mounting challenges, particularly from the PRC [People's Republic of China]… The PRC's coercion and aggression spans the globe, but it is most acute in the Indo-Pacific' (White House 2022a, p. 5). In response, the US says that it is 'committed to an Indo-Pacific that is free and open, connected, prosperous, secure, and resilient' (White House 2022a, p. 7). The US describes a 'free and open Indo-Pacific' as one 'where governments can make their own sovereign choices, consistent with their obligations under international law; and where seas, skies, and other shared domains are lawfully governed' (White House 2022a, p. 8). It claims that it will 'support open societies and… ensure Indo-Pacific governments can make independent political choices free from coercion; we will do so through investments in democratic institutions, a free press, and a vibrant civil society' (White House 2022a, p. 8). The US Strategy also explicitly includes the Pacific Islands region, stating that the US 'will seek to be an indispensable partner to Pacific Island nations, in ever-closer coordination with other partners who share that commitment' (White House 2022a, p. 10). Similar (although not always identical) sentiments are repeated by the other countries that have adopted the Indo-Pacific narrative (Government of Japan 2019;

Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2020; Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs 2022; MOFA Korea 2022; HM Government 2023).

By emphasising the importance of respecting sovereignty and of achieving partnership with PICs, the US and other partners that have adopted the Indo-Pacific narrative have opened themselves up to rhetorical entrapment by the Blue Pacific narrative, because it is now difficult for them to speak or behave in ways that could be perceived as impinging on the sovereignty and autonomy of PICs, or which do not support their priorities, including in respect of climate change. If the US and these other partners do speak or behave in ways that do not respect the autonomy and priorities of PICs, they expose themselves to shaming – something that Australia, for example, experienced in response to its failure to take strong domestic action to tackle climate change (Wallis 2021).

Consequently, there is evidence that partner countries have rhetorically accepted, and consequently adopted, the Blue Pacific narrative. For example, the US has adopted the Blue Pacific narrative, particularly since the election of the administration of Joseph Biden. In May 2021, Congressman Ed Case introduced the *Boosting Long-term U.S. Engagement in the Pacific" or "BLUE Pacific" Act* into Congress. Case (2020) stated that: 'In naming this bill, we not only pay tribute to the concept of the "Blue Pacific" embraced by leaders of the Pacific Islands Forum themselves as a shared identity and platform for collective action, but also intend for our efforts to be informed by and coordinated with the work of existing regional institutions and frameworks'. However, this legislation is yet to be approved. The US government explicitly adopted the Blue Pacific narrative when it launched the 'Partners in the Blue Pacific' (PBP) initiative in June 2022, alongside Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and the UK. This informal mechanism echoes elements of the Blue Pacific narrative, as it is intended to 'support prosperity, resilience, and security in the Pacific' with the aims of delivering results more effectively and efficiently, bolstering 'Pacific regionalism', and expanding opportunities for cooperation between the Pacific and the rest of the world (DFAT 2022).

In September 2022, the members of the PBP initiative held their first meeting with Pacific leaders on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly (United States State Department 2022). At that meeting, Blinken (2022) drew on the principles of the Blue Pacific narrative when he observed that the PBP initiative would 'work with Pacific Island countries' and be 'guided by you, the people of the Pacific Islands'. When Germany and Canada joined the initiative in September 2022, the PBP leaders commented in their joint statement that: 'this inclusive, informal mechanism will be guided by the PIF's 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent and existing Pacific regional architecture. This included ongoing engagement and consultation with the PIF and respect for the concept of Pacific regionalism and related regional mechanisms, sovereignty, transparency, accountability, and we are committed to being led and guided by the Pacific islands' (DFAT 2022). They went on to say

that the PBP will 'promote close dialogue and cooperation with the PICs under common principles such as regionalism, transparency, and accountability' (MOFA Japan 2022). South Korea subsequently joined, with the European Union, France, and India as observers.

At the September 2022 US-Pacific Islands summit, the US President and Pacific leaders adopted a declaration which recognised that: 'The Pacific Islands vision is reflected in its guiding documents which include the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent, a vision that the United States strongly supports… we [the US] resolve to protect the Blue Pacific and enhance the laws that govern it' (White House 2022b). The US also adopted its first Pacific Partnership Strategy (White House 2022c) which recognises the importance of the PIF's 2050 Strategy and undertakes that the US will 'partner with the Pacific Islands' along ten lines of effort that are 'designed to also advance the Pacific's own priorities, as outlined in the 2050 Strategy'.

The US government's speeches and policy pronouncements have been supported by practical implementation. As described in Chapter 7, it has opened new embassies in Solomon Islands and Tonga, and appropriated funds for new embassies in Kiribati and Vanuatu; recognised Cook Islands and Niue as sovereign countries; appointed a special envoy to the PIF; and renewed its compacts of free association with the Federated States of Micronesia and Palau (negotiations are ongoing with Marshall Islands). US officials have also made several high-level visits, including Blinken, Commander of US Indo-Pacific Command Admiral John C Aquilino, and National Security Council Coordinator for the Indo-Pacific Kurt Campbell. The US has also committed an extra US$810 million for its programs in the region (although this includes US$600 million over ten years associated with supporting the South Pacific Tuna Treaty), and to return Peace Corps volunteers to the region. However, much of this funding depends on annual Congressional approvals (which are not guaranteed in the US's febrile political environment).

The US's major partners in the Pacific Islands region are Australia and New Zealand, which are the partner countries most embedded in the region, particularly as they are geographically proximate. As Australia and New Zealand are members of the PIF, they are signatories to the communiques and declarations that adopt the Blue Pacific narrative, and therefore have approved it through the PIF. This has placed additional pressure on them to comply with the Blue Pacific narrative, as any speech or behaviour that is perceived to violate that narrative would expose them to shame for their hypocrisy.

The Australian government has enthusiastically adopted the Blue Pacific narrative in its official discourse, with its leaders and officials incorporating it into their public statements and documentation. For example, in a speech at the University of the South Pacific in 2019, then-conservative Prime Minister Scott Morrison (2019) said that he was there 'to listen and hear all of you', emphasised climate change as 'an important priority for the Pacific and for Australia', and praised the region's oceans management as a 'credit to all of us who call our 'Blue Pacific' home''. He stressed similar themes in numerous

later speeches, including to the PIF, where he recognised that 'global emissions reductions, we know, are essential for our Blue Pacific' (Morrison 2020).

However, there was a gap between the conservative Australian government's discourse and its policy, especially on climate change. But while the conservative government was reluctant to take ambitious domestic climate action, it did adopt some regional climate policies, including investing A$500 million for renewable energy and climate change and disaster resilience in 2019. When announcing this, then Prime Minister Morrison said that: 'Australia has and will continue to be a steadfast partner on climate action and on supporting the resilience and health of our Blue Pacific continent' (Morrison, Payne and Hawke 2019). Australia also supported efforts to map and settle maritime boundaries likely to be affected by climate change-induced sea level rise, through the Pacific Maritime Boundaries and Resilient Boundaries for the Blue Pacific Projects. And, in its 2020 regional COVID-19 response plan, it stated that Australia 'is committed to the Forum leaders' Boe Declaration (2018a) that outlines an expanded concept of security to ensure the stability and prosperity of our Blue Pacific' (DFAT 2020; PIF 2018a).

The Australian government's adoption of the Blue Pacific narrative has grown under the progressive Labor government elected in May 2022, which has implemented measures to address climate change (although several Pacific leaders have reservations about whether they are sufficiently ambitious (Martin 2022)). For example, Minister for International Development and the Pacific Pat Conroy (2022) has said that his government: 'recognises that climate change is the single greatest threat to the livelihoods, security and wellbeing of the peoples of the Pacific and an urgent global challenge, and we also know that ocean is at the heart of the Blue Pacific'. Therefore, 'as a member of the Pacific family, Australia is committed to action to enable a secure, prosperous and sustainable Blue Pacific' (Conroy 2022; Wong 2022a, 2022b). As detailed in Chapter 8, this commitment has been demonstrated by the introduction of policies such as offering opportunities for permanent Pacific migration to Australia and addressing the shortcomings of Australia's labour mobility schemes, which had generated concerns in the region (Wallis 2023). Australia's 2023 International Development Policy contained a page devoted to the 2050 Strategy and stated that 'Australia is committed to listening to and being guided by the wisdom of Pacific voices' (DFAT 2023, p. 21), although little of the substance of the policy explicitly responded to the priorities identified in the 2050 Strategy (Collins and Keen 2023). And the Labor government has continued policies that clash with the priorities of the region. For example, it has committed to continue the AUKUS security partnership announced in 2021 between the US, the UK, and Australia, under which Australia will be assisted in acquiring and developing nuclear-powered submarines. This policy has raised questions about Australia's commitment as a signatory to the 1985 Treaty of Rarotonga, which created the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone.

The threat posed by nuclear contamination is strongly felt in the Pacific Islands region given the legacy of nuclear weapons testing by the US, the

UK, and France. As there are concerns that this legacy has been inadequately dealt with – particularly given the ongoing risks of deteriorating Runit nuclear dome in the Marshall Islands – Pacific leaders have used the Blue Pacific narrative to pressure the US, the UK, and France to take remedial action. For example, in 2021, in then-Fijian Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama (2021) observed that: 'The nuclear testing legacy has left a gaping wound in our otherwise peaceful and bountiful Blue Pacific'. He went on to argue that: 'There is no question that the unresolved nuclear testing legacy issues in the Pacific continue to pose a clear and present danger to the livelihoods of the peoples of the Blue Pacific' (Bainimarama 2021). Pacific Elders Voice (2023), a group of eminent regional leaders, has also drawn on the Blue Pacific narrative to express their concerns about the AUKUS security partnership in the context of the unaddressed nuclear legacy in the Pacific.

New Zealand has also adopted the Blue Pacific narrative, particularly as it has articulated its 'Pacific identity' as part of its efforts to improve its relationships in the region (MFAT 2021a). Indeed, New Zealand has claimed that 'Like New Zealand, every one of our Pacific neighbours has a special relationship with the ocean' (MFAT 2023). After she was appointed as New Zealand Foreign Minister in November 2020, Nanaia Mahuta advanced a foreign policy informed by Māori concepts. An important aspect of that approach was to emphasise New Zealand's relationships in the Pacific, with Mahuta (2023) delivering a major speech in May 2023 in which she declared that: 'our interests are shaped by the great blue continent – Te Moana nui a Kiwa, our connections [with the Pacific Islands' are deep and longstanding'. Reflecting the Blue Pacific narrative, she reaffirmed the 'centrality of the Pacific regional architecture' and the importance of 'partnership with Pacific countries', which involves 'working closely with our Pacific partners towards meaningful outcomes that support long-term resilience, in line with Pacific priorities, and with high levels of Pacific ownership' (Mahuta 2023). She also stressed that 'climate change remains the single greatest existential threat to Pacific lives and livelihoods' (Mahuta 2023). Therefore, Mahuta (2023) emphasised that New Zealand 'support[s] the *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent*, and its vision of a resilient Pacific that is peaceful and prosperous'. As outlined in Chapter 9, New Zealand backed up its rhetorical adoption of the Blue Pacific narrative with policy changes. It increased development assistance to the region by almost 60 percent in 2018 and has made greater investments in defence and security cooperation, and climate change assistance.

Japan has also adopted the Blue Pacific narrative and been entrapped into ensuring that its discourse and policies reflect it. Indeed, Pacific leaders have deliberately used the Blue Pacific narrative to influence Japan. For example, in preparation for the 2018 PALM (Pacific Island Leaders Meeting) with Japan in May 2018, when he was PIF Chair, Tuila'epa emphasised that the 'Blue Pacific represents our collective identity, drawing on our connection to the Pacific Ocean, and reinvigorates our commitment to work together' (PIF 2018c). After the 2018 PALM meeting, the leaders' declaration stated that: 'Japan

acknowledged the commitment of the PIF Leaders to their shared stewardship and collective approach as the "Blue Pacific" to ensuring regional security, prosperity and the environmental integrity of the Pacific Ocean' (MOFA Japan 2018). Dame Meg Taylor (2018c) later reflected that: 'Over the past 12 months the Blue Pacific narrative has provided the basis for our solidarity on a number of different occasions, perhaps most notably during the PALM 8 meeting between PIF Leaders and Japan's Prime Minister'. Similarly, in the declaration made by leaders after the 2021 PALM 9 meeting, Japanese 'Prime Minister Suga welcomed the PIF's efforts to strengthen Pacific regionalism as one Blue Pacific and to develop the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent under the Framework for Pacific Regionalism' (PIF 2021c). Beyond rhetoric, Japan is a major development partner and lender to the region (Lowy Institute 2023).

Pacific leaders have been particularly concerned about Japan's release of nuclear-contaminated water into the Pacific Ocean and have used the Blue Pacific narrative to express their concern. For example, in 2021 Dame Meg Taylor (2021) released a statement regarding Japan's decision to release the water which said that: 'in 2019, Leaders expressed concern for the significance of the potential threat of nuclear contamination to the health and security of the Blue Pacific, her people and prospects…We are of the view that steps have not been sufficiently taken to address the potential harm to our Blue Pacific Continent, including possible environmental, health, and economic impacts'. The statement went on to remind Japan that: 'As required under international law, and as highlighted by the States Parties in December 2020, Japan should take all appropriate measures within its territory, jurisdiction or control to prevent significant transboundary harm to the territories of our Blue Pacific Continent, including our South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone' (Taylor 2021). In 2021, new PIF Secretary General Henry Puna (2021) made a statement to the International Atomic Energy Agency in which he said that: 'As emphasised by our Leaders in 2019, the threat of nuclear contamination continues to be of significant concern to the health and security of our Blue Pacific Continent'.

France has also adopted the language of the Blue Pacific, in part because it is a de facto member of the PIF via its territories of French Polynesia and New Caledonia. In the declaration from the 5th France-Oceania Summit in 2021, France 'welcome[d] the Pacific region's efforts to strengthen Pacific regionalism as one Blue Pacific and to develop the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent under the Framework for Pacific Regionalism' (PIF 2021d). France has been a particularly strong supporter of the issue of climate change. In 2018, President Emmanuel Macron (2018) stated that his fourth objective of France's Indo-Pacific axis is climate change, '[b]ecause we have a lot of islands and a lot of countries in the region, which are the first victims of climate change'. However, while France has been supportive with respect to climate action, the fact that it continues to hold colonies in the region signals there are limits to the extent to which it supports the calls for autonomy in the Blue Pacific narrative.

The UK has also been influenced to adopt the Blue Pacific narrative. As discussed in Chapter 11, in 2022, Minister for the Indo-Pacific Anne-Marie Trevelyan (2022a; Prime Minister's Office 2022) stated that the UK 'stand[s] ready to support the Pacific Island Forum's "2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent"'. Trevelyan (2022b) later said that 'the UK government will always stand up for our sovereignty and economic security – and that of our partners' and will engage in 'listening to the region, and working in partnership, is also central to our approach to building resilience, particularly to climate change'. In 2022, the UK established the Blue Planet Fund to 'support delivery of the region's 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent' (British High Commission Wellington, 2022). In 2022, then Foreign Secretary James Cleverly stated that 'we cannot talk about economic cooperation without also talking about the climate. And the importance of our relationships in the region…I felt strongly in the conversations that I had at the Partners in the Blue Pacific initiative at the UN General Assembly' (Cleverly 2022). Demonstrating that these commitments had led to policy changes, in April 2023 Cleverly visited PNG, Solomon Islands, and Samoa, where he announced a range of new funding programs, as well as commitments to address marine pollution under the UK's Blue Plant Fund (FCO 2023).

South Korea has also regularly adopted the Blue Pacific narrative in its official discourse. The theme for the 2023 Korea-Pacific Leaders' Summit was 'Navigating towards Co-Prosperity: Strengthening Cooperation with the Blue Pacific', and the 'Declaration and Action Plan' adopted at the summit repeatedly emphasised Korea's support for the 2050 Strategy (PIF 2023). This reflected a trend that developed in 2022, as Korea began to direct more attention to the region after adopting its Indo-Pacific Strategy. For example, the outcomes document from the 5th Korean-Pacific Islands Foreign Ministers' meeting, recognised 'the ROK's willingness to align regional development cooperation with the vision and priorities of the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent' (PIF, 2022c). In 2022, at the Korea-Pacific Islands Countries Seminar, PIF Deputy Secretary General Filimoni Manoni (2022) reminded Korean officials that: 'The 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent will represent our long-term pathway to deepen regional cooperation. It will reflect our shared strategic interests, as the Blue Pacific. It will frame our future partnerships and collaboration'. Korean Deputy Foreign Minister Yeo Seung Bae stated that: 'The Korean government will continue to be a reliable partner to realize the '2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent', a goal pursued by the Pacific Island Countries' (Yeo 2022).

Leveraging off its historical links with Fiji, India inaugurated a Forum for India-Pacific Island Countries Summit (FIPIC) in 2014. In aligning with the spirit of the Blue Pacific as a large ocean continent, in his opening remarks at the second FIPIC in 2015, Prime Minister Narendra Modi (2015) stated that 'the world may see you as Small Islands with modest populations. I see you as Large Ocean States with vast potential…Climate change is an existential threat to the Pacific Islands'. As outlined in Chapter 10, Modi (2023) travelled to

PNG in May 2023 for the third FIPIC. While he did not use the phrase Blue Pacific in his formal remarks at the forum, he repeated the image of Pacific Islands countries as 'not Small Island States, but Large Ocean Countries', connected to India via 'this vast ocean', which are central ideas behind the Blue Pacific narrative.

Pacific leaders have also used the Blue Pacific narrative to seek to influence China, but with less success than with the US and its allies and partners. For example, in 2019, at the 3rd China-Pacific Island Countries Economic Development and Cooperation Forum, Dame Meg Taylor (2019c) asked that: 'As we look to secure our future in the Pacific through the development of a 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent, what are the potential opportunities and challenges for strengthening engagement with China?' The joint statement released after the 2021 China-Pacific Island Countries Foreign Ministers' Meeting stated that: 'All parties agreed to enhance maritime cooperation, support the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent, work for a blue partnership, and jointly promote sustainable marine development' (MOFA China 2021a). In addition, a joint statement said that 'President Xi Jinping expressed readiness to support and join this important initiative to ensure alignment with the Pacific Roadmap for sustainable development and the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent' (MOFA China 2021b).

But, as described in Chapter 12, there is little evidence of China adopting the Blue Pacific narrative beyond these isolated examples. Instead, China remains focused on its own strategic narratives in its public statements about the region, particularly those based on 'South-South Cooperation' and the 'Belt and Road Initiative' (see, for example: MOFA China 2021b; 2022a; 2022b; Zhang 2022; 2023). While elements of these narratives overlap with the Blue Pacific narrative, China's efforts to secure a regional economic and security pact in April 2022 that could have constituted a rival to the PIF, and its efforts to create cooperative mechanisms outside the PIF, including the China-Pacific Island Countries Disaster Management Cooperation Mechanism and the China-Pacific Island Countries Center for Disaster Risk Reduction Cooperation, signal that it does not respect core principles of the Blue Pacific narrative focused on regional solidarity, with the PIF at the 'apex' of the region architecture (PIF 2022a, p. 7). Similar concerns were raised about the PBP initiative, which pushed the US and its partners to seek to engage far more deeply with the PIF.

Therefore, while the US and its allies and partners have incorporated the language or the spirit of the Blue Pacific narrative into their discourse and have reoriented their diplomatic and policy approach to emphasise the importance of regionalism, of the sovereignty and autonomy of PICs, of partnering with PICs, and of responding to PICs' priorities, China has been more reticent to explicitly incorporate the Blue Pacific narrative into its official discourse. This suggests that PICs have been able to leverage geopolitical interest in their region to use the Blue Pacific narrative to influence the US and its allies and partners because those states have been vulnerable to rhetorical entrapment

because of the principles they purport to respect under their respective Indo-Pacific policies, including their emphasis on sovereignty, partnership, and commitment to the 2050 Strategy. It has also been facilitated by the fact that the US and its allies and partners are democracies and are therefore potentially more vulnerable to shaming through the publicization of their hypocrisy or violations of the principles they purport to uphold. This can be contrasted to China, which is not as vulnerable to being shamed – and consequently rhetorically entrapped.

Conclusion

While the Blue Pacific narrative has influenced partners to change their statements and their policy approaches, this influence has not been absolute, with partners continuing policies that undermine, or at least sideline, Pacific priorities. For example, many of the US's commitments to the region are contingent on ongoing Congressional approvals, and partners continue to adopt policies that go against the priorities of PICs. This was demonstrated most visibly by the announcement of the AUKUS security partnership between the US, Australia, and the UK. As noted, the inclusion of plans for Australia to develop nuclear-powered submarines has caused concern amongst PICs both for its implications for the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone and for its potential militarisation of the region. Therefore, while less materially powerful states can use strategic narratives to influence and, at times, rhetorically entrap, more materially powerful partner states, 'narrative power' has limits (Hagström and Gustafsson 2019, p. 2021).

There is also evidence that partner countries have appropriated the Blue Pacific narrative to advance their own interests by seeking to legitimise their actions in ways that undermine Pacific regional decision-making processes. The PBP initiative is the most obvious example of this (Fry, Kabutaulaka and Wesley-Smith 2022). Although there have been subsequent efforts to engage Pacific leaders and the PIF, that the PBP initiative was announced solely by the partners, rather than alongside PICs, created the impression that it had circumvented regionalism despite the rhetoric claiming to respect PIF-centrality (Wallis and Powles 2023). This highlights another limit of narrative power: that strategic narratives may be appropriated by their target(s) which may attempt to, in turn, use those narratives through rhetorical action to seek to influence the original narrator(s). The Pacific Islands case illustrates that these attempts have no guarantee of success, with PICs aware of how the US and its allies and partners are using the Blue Pacific narrative and consequently continuing to emphasise the importance of PIF centrality and regional solidarity.

But this example of rhetorical appropriation also suggests possibilities for rhetorical compromise, with the potential for PICs to 'leverag[e] the complementary security interests of major external powers in the region' outlined in their respective Indo-Pacific narratives to provide the 'basis for building a

more open and inclusive regional order, where the complementary security interests of all states are prioritized and advanced' (Tarte 2021, p. 41). This could see PICs, on the one hand, and the US and its allies and partners, on the other hand, finding 'synergies between the Indo Pacific and the Blue Pacific agendas' on issues such as maritime security and climate change (Tarte 2023). For example, the Pacific Fusion Centre is funded by Australia to help advance regional maritime domain awareness, but represents 'an example of the successful alignment of a regional priority with an initiative that furthers the aim of Australia's national foreign policy for stronger security integration across the region' (Dame Meg Taylor quoted in Wallis 2021, p. 500).

Overall, our analysis illustrates how less materially powerful states can use strategic narratives to influence more materially powerful partners. This has been particularly effective for PICs attempting to influence the US and its allies and partners because their Blue Pacific narrative has dovetailed with the Indo-Pacific narratives adopted by the US and many of its partners and allies. As both narratives emphasise respect for sovereignty, openness, democracy, and partnering with PICs, this has helped to rhetorically entrap many of the region's partners, because if they speak or behave in ways that are perceived to violate either narrative, they risk shame. This can be contrasted to China, which has been reluctant to adopt the Blue Pacific narrative, instead favouring its longstanding narrative of 'South-South cooperation' and its more recent narrative based on the developmental opportunities offered by its Belt and Road Initiative. PICs' rhetorical action has also been aided by the greater attention their region has received from partners anxious about developing strategic competition. However, we also find that there can be a gap between rhetoric and policy change, and that more materially powerful states can appropriate strategic narratives to seek to try to advance their own interests. Nevertheless, the coordinated and comprehensive way PICs have managed to use rhetorical action to spread the Blue Pacific narrative since 2017 is notable, and offers an alternative perspective to most analyses, which focus on the use of strategic narratives by great powers.

Our analysis has focused on how PICs have sought to use the Blue Pacific strategic narrative to influence their partner states. The strategic narratives literature is also interested in how political leaders use narratives to attempt to influence their domestic political constituency. While the receptivity of the Blue Pacific narrative by citizens of PICs is beyond the scope of our inquiry, there are interesting questions for future research about whether, and how, Pacific leaders may be rhetorically entrapped by their own citizens to fulfil the aspirations of the Blue Pacific narrative.

Note

1 This chapter is an abbreviated version of: J Wallis, M Koro, and C O'Dwyer, 2024 'The 'Blue Pacific' strategic narrative: rhetorical action, acceptance, entrapment, and appropriation?', *The Pacific Review*, 37(4), pp. 797–824, https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2023.2253377

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7 The United States' statecraft in the Pacific Islands[1]

Alan Tidwell and Joanne Wallis

Introduction

In the context of its broader strategic competition with China, over the last five years the United States (US) has considerably increased its focus on the Pacific Islands region. This chapter outlines the contours of the US's statecraft in the region since 2018 across the diplomatic, developmental, and military realms. It concludes by arguing that, while the US has made a significant number of diplomatic gestures and has announced a range of substantial spending programs in the region, implementation of these announcements has been stymied, primarily because domestic political divisions have delayed their passage through Congress. Therefore, while Pacific leaders have welcomed the US's engagement, the window for its statecraft to successfully build its reputation and relationships in ways that enhance its influence remains tight.

This chapter begins by examining the rationale behind US engagement with Pacific Island countries (PICs). Not surprisingly, the drive for American engagement centres on strategic competition with the People's Republic of China. However, given the global pull on American resources and attention, the US struggles at times to engage effectively with the Pacific Islands region. Washington's diplomatic, developmental, and military statecraft has to adapt to the peculiarities of the Pacific Islands region, inasmuch as many of the programs used by American diplomats were not purpose-designed for the region. Finally, the constant test of US engagement in the region revolves around the contest for domestic political influence between the US executive and legislative branches.

Why is the US interested in the Pacific Islands region?

The US's interest in the Pacific Islands region, particularly the northern subregion of Micronesia, stems from its strategic location: it is home to important US military bases and is proximate to Taiwan and China, both likely sites of potential conflict over the coming decades. Indeed, the US government has long regarded its Micronesian territories and the compact states as a 'security border', as they sit across geopolitically significant maritime routes (Lum and Vaughn 2007, p. 5; Thomas 2010). Accordingly, as discussed in Chapter 5,

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the US has Joint Region Marianas, consisting of US Naval Base Guam and Andersen Air Force Base Anderson Air Force Base on Guam, Marine Camp Blaz on Guam, and the Ronald Reagan Ballistic Missile Defense test site on Kwajalein Atoll in the Republic of Marshall Islands.

The strategic value of the Micronesian sub-region has been evident to the US for more than a century and encouraged the US to seize Guam (Guåhan) during the 1898 Spanish-American War. At this time the US also formally annexed Hawai'i (where it had first arrived in the 1840s) and then acquired American Samoa in 1899 under the tripartite agreement with the United Kingdom and Germany. After the First World War, the US became concerned about the potential for islands in the northern Pacific to be used by adversaries to cut off its access to the Philippines (then a US colony) or to launch attacks on Hawai'i or Guam (Hanlon 2014). As the US had feared, during the Second World War Japan used these islands, which it held under the 'South Seas Mandate' from the League of Nations, to mount assaults on US bases in Hawai'i, Guam, and other US and Australian territories in the Pacific.

In 1942, the US and its allies halted Japan's southward advance in the Battles of the Coral Sea and Midway. From 1944 onwards, the Americans and their allies reclaimed their territories and took Japanese-held islands, gradually extending to the entirety of the Japanese-controlled Micronesian sub-region (Firth 1997). Conscious of its vulnerabilities in that sub-region, after the war the US Department of Defense successfully advocated for the American government to seek these islands under a United Nations trusteeship. The Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands (consisting of the contemporary Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), Republic of Marshall Islands (RMI), Republic of Palau, and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI) (Fry 2019)) was formally approved by the United Nations in 1947 (UNSC Resolution S/318, 2 April 1947).

The perceived strategic value of the Trust Territory was enhanced in 1951 when future US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles devised an 'Island Chain Strategy', under which he proposed that the US could surround China and the Soviet Union with naval bases to project power and restrict sea access (Umetsu 1996). This strategy was adopted by General Douglas MacArthur (1951), who described the Pacific Ocean as 'a vast moat to protect us [the US] as long as we held it', with this control coming through 'a chain of islands' from which the US could 'dominate with sea and air power every Asiatic port from Vladivostok to Singapore'. If the US and its allies controlled the region, MacArthur (1951) argued that it would have 'the friendly aspect of a peaceful lake'. This saw the US government decide that 'the creation of an "American lake" [in the Pacific Ocean]… [w]as the best means by which to guarantee U.S. security interests vis-à-vis East Asia' (Friedman 2009, p. 1).

The features of the 'American Lake' ebbed and flowed over time, driven by administration interest, ally concerns, and external events. Under international pressure, the US established a Future Political Status Commission in 1967 to negotiate the end of the Trusteeship and to develop a solution that balanced international ideas about self-determination with US security interests (Gale 1979). The Nixon administration opted to cede Okinawa back to

allied Japan in 1971. The wave of newly independent PICs in the 1970s and 1980s drove diplomatic engagement. On July 1978 – on the eve of signing the Treaty of Tarawa (1979) – Assistant Secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Richard Holbrooke testified before the US Senate's Foreign Relations Committee hearing entitled the 'Emerging Pacific Island Community', saying that: 'The region… has been relatively overlooked since the end of World War II' (quoted in Johnson 1983, p. 85). With that claim, he announced his intention to create a 'Pacific desk' at the State Department.

During the 1980s, PICs received greater American attention as the Soviet Union began to show interest in the region. The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and Kiribati negotiated a short-lived fishing access agreement in 1985, which gave impetus to negotiations for the South Pacific Tuna Treaty between the US and 16 Pacific countries (Tarai 2015; Willis 2017). The end of the Cold War and the suddenly exploding needs of those states formerly associated with the USSR contributed to the erosion of US interest in the Pacific. The US shuttered the State Department's Office of Pacific Island Affairs, closed the embassy in Honiara, and relocated aid posts in PNG and Fiji to Manila. It also halved the number of Peace Corps volunteers, limited its participation in regional organisations, and only provided aid to those countries with which it maintained a formal association (Lum and Vaughn 2007). Indeed, in 2007 a senior State Department official admitted that: 'the nations of the Pacific have not always received either adequate diplomatic attention or development assistance' (Davis 2007).

The eventual outcome of the Future Political Status Commission was a decision that the US would establish a compact of free association relationships with the FSM (in 1986), the RMI (in 1986), and Palau (in 1994), under which it is entitled to operate military bases and to make decisions relating to their external security, but those states are given a high degree of autonomy over domestic policy. In exchange, the compact states receive US security guarantees, economic assistance, and their citizens have the right to live and work in the US. CNMI opted for commonwealth status, under which it became an unincorporated part of the US, a territory not destined for American statehood, but with a high degree of autonomy. Given its military significance, Guam was retained as an 'unincorporated territory', a 'carefully worded' way of acknowledging its continued status as a colony (Davis 2011, p. 221).

The US's 'struggle to maintain influence' in the Pacific Islands region

As discussed in Chapter 1, like its allies and partners, the US is concerned about China's increasingly visible presence in the Pacific Islands region and the consequences that this may have for its strategic interests. A perception that the US had lost influence in the region was revealed in June 2016, when the House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs held a hearing on the topic 'US Policy in the Pacific: The Struggle to Maintain Influence'.

The Committee chair, Congressman Matt Salmon (2016), opened the hearing by noting that 'the Pacific Islands region, far from both the mainland United States and the core of Asia, is perhaps the most overlooked region of the Asia-Pacific'. Accordingly, in the Trump administration's 2017 National Security Strategy, which outlined the US's focus on the 'Indo-Pacific' region, PICs were presented as 'key to the President's vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific… based on respect for sovereignty and the rule of law'.

Like Australia (see Chapter 8), the US was alarmed by April 2018 reports that China was in talks to build a military base in Vanuatu (although this was denied by both governments and has not eventuated), which could challenge free movement in vital sea and air lanes of communication. The Trump administration was particularly concerned about emerging strategic competition with China and made clear its view that 'authoritarian revisionist powers' were the greatest threat to a 'free and open Indo-Pacific in which all nations, large and small, are secure in their sovereignty and able to pursue economic growth consistent with international law and principles of fair competition' (Department of State 2019a, p. 5). This was presented in contrast to China, which the statement claimed practised 'repression at home and abroad. Beijing is intolerant of dissent, aggressively controls media and civil society, and brutally suppresses ethnic and religious minorities' (Department of State 2019a, p. 21). The Trump administration also argued that Beijing's practices 'undermine the conditions that have promoted stability and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific for decades' (Department of State 2019a, p. 21).

The Trump administration's nascent Pacific Islands policy came into public view at the November 2018 APEC leaders meeting hosted by PNG. Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and the US announced plans to electrify PNG (Tillett 2018). Australia, PNG, and the US also announced plans to upgrade the Lombrum Naval base on Manus Island (Murphy 2018). The US had established a base on Manus Island in 1944, at the height of its Second World War offensive, which recognised its important strategic location as an entry point to the Pacific Islands region (Beazley 2017). After the war, the base was used by Australia, which was a colonial administrator until PNG's independence in 1975. The base was to be redeveloped in the context of Australia's Pacific Maritime Security Programme, under which patrol boats and assistance are provided to PICs to help them police their maritime territories. Importantly, the announcements featured collaborative work between the US and others, as opposed to being unitary steps. But progress on the electrification plans and the upgrade to Manus has been modest at best.

Diplomatic statecraft

Accordingly, in 2019, the Trump administration sought to reinvigorate its Pacific Islands diplomacy. In February 2019, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo attended the Micronesian Presidents' Summit. During his address, Pompeo

implicitly criticised China – and explicitly stated that the US was seeking to exclude other powers – by stating that the US aims to 'ensure our friends across Micronesia remain free to pursue policies that support their national sovereignty as well as their long-term security, economic development, and prosperity'. In May 2019, President Donald Trump hosted the presidents of Palau, RMI, and FSM at the White House – the first time that the leaders of the three compact states had been hosted by a US President (White House 2019). Notably, the presidents of Palau, RMI, and FSM adopted the language of the US government's Indo-Pacific strategy when, alongside Trump, they jointly 'reaffirm[ed] our interest in a free, open, and prosperous Indo-Pacific region' (White House 2019), which was unique in the region.

The September 2019 news that Solomon Islands and Kiribati had switched their diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to China motivated an increase in the tempo of the US government's attention. Reflecting its interest in countering China's regional ambitions, the US government responded by cancelling US Vice President Mike Pence's planned meeting with Solomon Islands Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly. A US official then commented that: 'the decision by the Solomon Islands to change its diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to the People's Republic of China has consequences. They're hurting a historically strong relationship by doing this' (Rampton 2019).

The US government also publicly affirmed its interest in limiting China's presence in October 2019, when it convened the first US–Taiwan Pacific Islands Dialogue. Four PICs recognised Taiwan at the time: the RMI, Nauru, Palau, and Tuvalu (Nauru switched to China in 2024). At the dialogue, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Australia, New Zealand, and the Pacific Islands Sandra Oudkirk (2019) implicitly criticised China by saying that 'We want to work together as partners, not as borrowers and lenders', as China had emerged as a substantial regional lender. Oudkirk (2019) also emphasised the Trump administration's characterisation of its Indo-Pacific policy as requiring that 'economies must be open, transparent, and rules-based'. This theme was continued by Representative Ed Case when he introduced the *BLUE Pacific Act* in 2020. Case (2020) emphasised that the bill 'sends a clear and powerful statement of what our foreign policy seeks to achieve-a regional order, built on mutual assistance and benefit, free of coercion, and fully respectful of the sovereignty of all nations'.

During 2020, American diplomacy was constrained by most PICs closing their borders due to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, in late 2020, the State Department held a series of virtual discussions with the ambassadors to the US and permanent representatives to the United Nations from 12 PICs. The US Defense Department also hosted virtual meetings with Pacific leaders, including INDOPACOMM (US Indo-Pacific Command), co-hosting the annual Indo-Pacific Chiefs of Defense conference with the Fiji Military Forces. The State Department also announced a further US$200 million in new funding under the Pacific Pledge.

During 2020 US government officials became more explicitly critical of China's role, highlighting the government's desire to limit China's influence. For example, in October 2020, National Security Advisor Robert C. O'Brien (2020) released a statement that said that: 'The United States is a Pacific power. The People's Republic of China's IUU fishing, and harassment of vessels operating in the exclusive economic zones of other countries in the Indo-Pacific, threatens our sovereignty, as well as the sovereignty of our Pacific neighbors and endangers regional stability'. In accordance with Article VI of the *Niue Treaty on Cooperation in Fisheries Surveillance and Law Enforcement in the South Pacific*, and through shiprider agreements signed with PICs, the US Government, particularly the Coast Guard, has played a key role in 'countering these destabilizing and malign actions' (O'Brien 2020).

The Biden administration, like its predecessor, pursues US strategic interests. Kurt Campbell, Biden's Indo-Pacific coordinator in the National Security Council (NSC), led the administration's Pacific Islands policy. He warned in January 2022 of a looming 'strategic surprise' in the Pacific (Brunnstrom and Needham 2022). In late March 2022, news leaked that Solomon Islands had signed a security agreement with China. Although the final agreement of the China-Solomon Islands security agreement has not been released publicly, a leaked draft was interpreted as potentially opening the way for a Chinese military presence (Kapetas 2022). While the Solomon Islands government denied this was the intent (Movono and Lyons 2022), the Australian and US governments quickly responded to the risk of a Chinese military presence. To stave off finalisation of the agreement, senior Australian intelligence officials visited Honiara on April 6, 2022. Then, on April 21, Campbell, along with Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and Pacific Affairs, Daniel Kritenbrink, paid Honiara a visit – the first diplomatic engagement in 29 years (McNeill and Wallis 2023). The Biden administration's 2022 Indo-Pacific Strategy, stated that 'the PRC is combining its economic, diplomatic, military, and technological might as it pursues a sphere of influence in the Indo-Pacific and seeks to become the world's most influential power' framed the American response (White House 2022d, p. 5). During the visit to Solomon Islands, Kritenbrink commented that: 'We have respect for the Solomon Islands' sovereignty, but we also wanted to let them know that if steps were taken [by China] to establish a de facto permanent military presence, power projection capabilities or a military installation, then we would have significant concerns and we would very naturally respond to those concerns' (quoted in Kine 2022).

In March 2022, the Biden administration reinvigorated negotiations on the new compact agreements by appointing Joseph Yun as Special Presidential Envoy for Compact Negotiations. In June 2022, the US announced that it had coordinated with Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom (UK) to convene the 'Partners in the Blue Pacific'. This initiative was described as an 'inclusive, informal mechanism to support Pacific priorities more effectively and efficiently' (U.S. Embassy in Canberra 2022a). The initiative used the term 'Blue Pacific', which referenced the concept first articulated by PIF

leaders' in 2017 to describe their approach to regionalism based on solidarity and Pacific autonomy (see Chapter 6). However, the US government and its partners only formally consulted the Pacific heads of mission in Washington on 23 and 24 June 2022, with the announcement coming on 24 June 2022. No PIC, or the PIF as the peak multinational regional institution, was invited to participate.

The Biden administration then convened the first White House hosted US–Pacific Islands Country Summit on 28 and 29 September 2022. Importantly, the Declaration agreed by President Biden and the leaders of the 14 PICs who attended stated that 'in the face of a worsening climate crisis and an increasingly complex geopolitical environment, we recommit ourselves to working together in genuine partnership' (White House 2022a). The Declaration resulted from substantial negotiation with PICs and reflected the issues raised in the PIF's 2050 Strategy on the Blue Pacific Continent. Importantly, it incorporated PICs's interest in responding to climate change, which PIF leaders have identified as an 'existential threat' (PIF 2018).

To enhance its diplomatic engagement, the US-appointed former US ambassador to Fiji, Kiribati, and Tonga, Frankie Reed, as special envoy to the PIF in 2022 (White House 2022b). This appointment also signalled the US's interest in establishing a greater role for itself in regional institutions. This was followed by reports in October 2022 that Guam was interested in seeking membership of the Forum. While Guam's Lieutenant Governor Josh Tenorio said that his government had made the decision independently of Washington, there was skepticism in the region about whether the US was behind the proposal (Faa 2022). There was also concern that Guam's membership could destabilise the Forum, as it may seem like it was 'being taken over by powers' (Tarcisius Kabutaulaka quoted in Faa 2022).

The momentum of the US government's diplomacy continued into 2023. It opened its Solomon Islands embassy in February 2023 and the Tonga embassy in May 2023, began to return the Peace Corps to the region, and re-established the USAID mission in Fiji. In March 2023, NSC Indo-Pacific Coordinator Kurt Campbell visited PNG, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, and Fiji. During Campbell's March 2023 Honiara trip, he called for 'more transparency' about the Solomon Islands–China security agreement and said that his delegation had 'made clear its expectations' around potential Chinese military presence 'going forward' (Sas and Aumanu-Leong 2023).

On 22 May 2023, President Biden was scheduled to visit PNG to meet with PIF leaders, which would have been the first time a sitting US President had travelled to the region. Although Biden ultimately cancelled the trip due to domestic concerns, Blinken and Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin made the trip. The US then held the second US–Pacific Islands Forum Leaders' Summit in September 2023 in Washington. That summit resulted in a 'Statement on Reaffirming U.S.-Pacific Partnership' (White House 2023a) and a commitment to hold biennial summits starting in 2025. It was notable that

the summit was relabelled to explicitly reference the PIF, and the summit Statement recognised 'the Pacific Islands Forum as the apex of the Pacific regional architecture' (White House 2023a). While the US is not a member of the PIF, this relabelling reflected the US government's interest in greater engagement with regional institutions. The US is already a founding member of the other major regional multilateral institution, the Pacific Community (which focuses on economic and environmental issues), as well as the important South Pacific Regional Environmental Program, and the Pacific Islands Development Program based in Hawai'i, which is, in turn, a member of the peak PIF-governed Council of Regional Organisations of the Pacific.

The US continues to exhibit anxiety about China's presence in the Pacific Islands region. For example, at a hearing of the Committee on Natural Resources of the US House of Representatives in June 2023 focused on the renewal of the compact agreements, Representative Bruce Westerman argued that: 'The PRC seeks to undermine U.S. interests in the Pacific… It is imperative that we find ways to counter the PRC's malign influence and to protect U.S. interests in the region' (Indo-Pacific Taskforce 2023). Colonel (Ret.) Albert Short, who had been the chief negotiator of the 2003 compacts, characterised the compact states as 'a bulwark for our defense and security concerns in the North Pacific' (Indo-Pacific Taskforce 2023). Therefore, for Short, the US's interests in the compact states are 'simply location, location, location… It is like real estate', as the US has the 'right to install defense and security installations' and the US's 'capability to deny any third-party access… effectively neutralizes a huge area of the North Pacific' (Indo-Pacific Taskforce 2023). Colonel (Ret.) Grant Newsham told the hearing that the compact states 'underpin the entire United States defense posture and strategy in the Western Pacific and East Asia', as they are 'perfectly situated as footholds' (Indo-Pacific Taskforce 2023). This sort of testimony served the rhetorical purpose of generating a rationale attractive to China hawk politicians, who would otherwise have little interest in passing the compact funding agreements.

Economic statecraft

Alongside its diplomatic performances, the US has used development and other assistance as a tool of statecraft to improve its reputation and relationships in the Pacific Islands region. As with the US's diplomacy, these efforts ramped up in 2019. In August 2019, new Secretary of the Interior David Bernhardt led the US delegation to the Forum leaders' meeting and made a 'pledge' of US$36.4 million in new assistance (Department of State 2019c). This announcement became known as the 'Pacific Pledge of the Indo-Pacific Strategy' and was expanded a month later to include an additional commitment of US$100 million, including that USAID would provide US$63 million in new programs in 2020, which represented a promise to double US development assistance (Department of State 2019b). However, most of the Pacific Pledge funding went to compact states, and its spending

announcements were small, both in comparison to broader US government development spending and spending by other partners. For example, Australia spent US$864.60 million on development assistance in the Pacific Islands region in 2019, while the US spent only US$140.07 million (Lowy Institute 2024).

In 2020 Congress also established a bipartisan Congressional Pacific Islands Caucus 'dedicated to promoting greater understanding of this region and advocating for a sound United States foreign policy in the Pacific Islands that advances our shared interests and values' (Case 2020). The Caucus co-chair, Ed Case, cosponsored the *BLUE Pacific Act* in July 2020. The bill was to be supported by '$1 billion in assistance programs for the region for each of the next five fiscal years, more than triple current levels of assistance' (Case 2020). Case and his cosponsors have reintroduced versions of the bill, which has helped promote a greater understanding of what the US can do to support PICs.

The US then made several policy announcements in 2022 about its assistance to the region. PNG was chosen as one of five priority countries for US engagement through *US Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability Act* (U.S. Mission Papua New Guinea 2022). Originally known by the short name *The Global Fragility Act*, the legislation stood out because of the ten-year-long time frame. Another feature of the Act was that the legislation emerged from the legislative branch, not via the executive. Congress authorised up to US$200 million per year for ten years for the five recipient countries. Washington also announced that Solomon Islands, Tonga, Kiribati, and Vanuatu would be candidates for new US embassies, signalling a desire on Washington's part to have more direct relationships in the region.

In August 2022, the US government released USAID's (2022) 2022–2027 Pacific Islands Strategic Framework, and in September 2022, its first Pacific Partnership Strategy. Notably, the Strategy referenced the 'Blue Pacific' concept and cited the PIF's '2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent' (see Chapter 6). It argued that, given the challenges the region faces, the US is 'elevating broader and deeper engagement with the Pacific Islands as a priority of US foreign policy' (White House 2022c, p. 4). Four overriding objectives were identified, and each of the ten lines of effort identified in the strategy to meet them was explicitly linked to thematic areas identified in the Forum's 2050 Strategy.

In the 2022 Roadmap for a 21st-century US–Pacific Island Partnership, the US pledged US$810 in additional expanded programs in the region (White House 2022b). Included in this sum was US$600 million over ten years to meet the US's nearly trebled commitment to the South Pacific Tuna Treaty. The renewed treaty was not signed until March 28, 2024, and in addition to the already mentioned sums, it also included a one-time commitment of US$10 million to be shared equally by the signatories in 2024 (Molyneaux 2024). It is the only significant spending agreement the US has with the entirety of the Pacific. Dr Manu Tupou-Roosen, FFA Agency Director General, said, 'The Tuna Treaty is a cornerstone in our relationship with the

United States' (Molyneaux 2024). But party politics has tested Congress's capacity to fund US policy implementation in the Pacific Islands region. Funding for the Tuna Treaty is not guaranteed, for example. More concerning was the status of funding for the compacts of free association.

Secretary of State Blinken signed new compact agreements with FSM and Palau during his May 2023 visit to PNG (signing the new compact with RMI was delayed until October 2023 because of concern about the adequacy of US compensation and remediation for US nuclear testing in the country). New funding was not signed into law until March 11, 2024. The third tranche of 20-year funding provides a total of US$7.1 billion to four recipients (House Committee on Natural Resources 2023). FSM receives US$3.3 billion, an increase of 55%. RMI's increase is US$2.3 billion, 130% above previous levels. Palau receives US$889 million, with a huge 288% increase. Also in the mix is the United States Postal Service, which provides all postal services to the compact states; their increase is US$600 million. RMI Foreign Minister Kitlang Kabua described the generous funding as being 'because of China. We're not naïve' (McKenzie 2023). Even US Presidential envoy Joseph Yun admitted that 'It's not secret – China is a factor' (McKenzie 2023). The delay in compact funding renewal was costly. Compact funding had dried up at the end of September 2023, with only partial financial support and federal services being provided under a continuing resolution enacted by Congress.

While Biden announced a further US$200 million of funding to the Pacific Islands region at his September 2023 summit with Pacific leaders, most funding commitments were accompanied by disclaimer that they were 'subject to Congressional notification' or reliant on 'working with Congress' (White House 2023b). Indeed, then Solomon Islands Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare declined to attend the summit, arguing that the US 'lecture you and lecture you' about 'how good they are' but 'nothing came up out of' the first summit (quoted in Sas, Swanston and Aumanu-Leong 2023). This raises questions about the ability of summits alone to generate influence, particularly if there is little substance given to the rhetoric through implementation (McNeill and Wallis 2023).

In addition to challenges to the implementation of its Pacific Islands policy, the US's influence in the region has been undermined by skepticism about the US's commitment to addressing climate change, which the region defines as an existential threat (PIF 2018). Even though the Biden administration re-joined the Paris Agreement in 2021, the potential for a second Trump presidency in 2025 raises the prospect of the US withdrawing from the Paris Agreement. The US abstained from voting on the UN General Assembly resolution proposed by Vanuatu in November 2022 to seek clarification from the International Court of Justice about the obligations of governments to protect their populations and others from the effects of climate change. The Republican-led House of Representatives also blocked US funding to the Green Climate Fund in 2023.

Military statecraft

The US government had been engaged in enhancing its military presence in the Pacific Islands region well before the more recent increase in its diplomacy and development began (see Chapter 5). In 2012 the government announced that the Space Fence radar site would be built on Kwajalein Island in the RMI to provide 'Space Surveillance Network capability'. This was in addition to the existing US Army Garrison Kwajalein Atoll. US forces from Okinawa in Japan began relocating to Guam in response to Okinawan protests against the continued presence of large numbers of US military personnel (and cases of violence by them against the local population). Guam plays an outsized role in US defence planning in the Pacific, as it is home to Joint Region Marianas and Marine Camp Blaz (Robson 2023), and the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) – a ballistic missile defence system deployed on Guam since 2013.

Reflecting the Trump administration's more overtly strategic interest in the Indo-Pacific, its stated interest in the Pacific Islands region acquired a more strategic edge. For example, in 2018, Under Secretary of the Navy, Thomas Modly (2018) visited Fiji 'as part of the implementation of the National Defense Strategy of the United States'. Modly (2018) used the Department of Defense's language of 'partnership' – first begun formally in 1988 – to frame his trip to Fiji. He focused on maritime awareness and the role the US could play in helping Fiji protect its EEZ.

The US military has four partnerships with PICs, all through the State Partnership Program, which formalises capacity building relationships between United States National Guard units and Fiji, Tonga, PNG, and Samoa (National Guard n.d.). These partnerships aim to deepen interoperability through an exchange of expertise, having already delivered programs in medical training, gender protection advice, and firefighting. The recent inclusion of Samoa, a country without a military, in the State Partnership Program signals an innovation in delivering support to PICs (Marcus, 2023).

Shiprider agreements, totalling 12 in the Pacific Islands, enable United States Coast Guard and Navy vessels to patrol and monitor the vast exclusive economic zones of PICs, protecting their maritime sovereignty while also building maritime domain awareness capabilities (Pruett 2024). American use of shiprider agreements originated in the Caribbean and was used to combat drug trafficking. In the Pacific, the first country to enter into a ship rider agreement with the US was the Cook Islands in 2008 (Pruett 2024). Ship rider agreements in the Pacific are typically framed in the context of illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing and, more broadly, in terms of maritime domain awareness.

In addition to capacity building and work to address non-traditional security, the US has also put forward the Pacific Deterrence Initiative (PDI). First proposed to Congress in 2020, the PDI sought to counter perceived Chinese coercion by making the Indo-Pacific region the US's 'priority theatre'

to 'regain the advantage' (U.S. Indo-Pacific Command 2020). However, the initial PDI proposal was not ultimately allocated dedicated funding (unlike its equivalent, the European Deterrence Initiative), but was instead designated as a 'budget display' to 'allow Congress to track these efforts over time, assess their progress, and make adjustments when necessary' (Inhofe and Reed 2020). The PDI, has been characterised as representing a 'fundamental lack of urgency, ambition, and imagination necessary to meet the pacing challenge posed by China' (Walker 2022), particularly as the funds requested are relatively small in relation to US defence spending. In 2022, US$6.1 billion was requested to fund the PDI in 2023 (Office of the Under Secretary of Defense 2022), which was a reduction of US$1 billion from 2021 funding (Bertuca 2022; Walker 2022). Moreover, analysts noted that 'three quarters of posture funding in the initiative is concentrated in Japan and Guam' (Walker 2022). Indeed, when testifying about the PDI in 2022, Case (2022) commented that: 'During my recent delegation visit to the Pacific, a recurring theme from our friends and allies is the need for more "US presence"'. In the 2024 National Defense Authorization Act, the PDI was allocated roughly US$12 billion, somewhat less than the US$15.4 billion that INDOPACOM hoped for but far greater than the Biden administration's proposed US$8.1 billion (Thornberry and Lehn 2024).

The US's military interests in the Pacific Islands region and the broader Indo-Pacific were enhanced in September 2021 by the announcement of the AUKUS security partnership between the US, UK, and Australia (Biden, Morrison and Johnson 2021). Under this partnership, the US and UK pledged to assist Australia to develop nuclear-powered submarines by roughly 2040. This was unpopular in the Pacific Islands region, given the legacy of nuclear weapons testing by the US, the UK, and France, and the region's commitment to the 1985 Treaty of Rarotonga, which created the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone. Notably, the US has still not ratified the three protocols of the Rarotonga Treaty (despite signing them in 1996). Some Pacific leaders, such as Fijian Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka, have since said that they support the move (Srinivasan 2023). But Cook Islands Prime Minister Mark Brown has said that the development of nuclear-powered submarines is 'going against' the regional commitment to remaining nuclear-free and that 'we've already seen it will lead to an escalation of tension, and we're not happy with that as a region' (RNZ 2023a).

The Biden administration's effort to increase the US's military presence in the region has continued in 2022 and 2023. In January 2022 it was reported that the Pentagon had designated Palau as the possible site of a new military base, with plans to build a US$197 million Tactical Multi-Mission Over-the Horizon Radar Transmitter Facility on Ngaraard (Malama 2022; Island Times 2023). This followed Palauan President Thomas Remengesau inviting the US to build military bases in 2020 (Indo-Pacific Defense Forum 2021). The US and FSM governments have also agreed to establish a more permanent US military presence (FSM Embassy 2021).

During his May 2023 visit, Secretary of Defense Austin signed a defence cooperation agreement (DCA) with PNG. Austin (2023) repeated the terminology

of the US's Indo-Pacific Strategy when he described the agreement as reflecting 'our partnership and our shared values as Pacific countries, the importance of ensuring the security and prosperity of the region, and our shared commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific'. However, these values were not universally endorsed by all Papua New Guineans, with concern expressed in some quarters about the scope of access that the US was being given (RNZ 2023b). The agreement extends the scope of the original 1989 US-PNG Status of Forces Agreement that gave the US military primary jurisdiction over criminal matters involving American personnel. The current DCA gives 'exclusive right to exercise criminal jurisdiction over US personnel', which may give rise to a legal challenge, similar to the way the constitutionality of immunities granted to Australian personnel in 2004 was successfully challenged in the PNG Supreme Court in 2005. US defence analysts praised the agreement's potential as a 'way for the U.S. military to gain influence on the island and shift military policy to fall more in line with that of the U.S.' (Allen, Martinez Machain, and Flynn, 2023). Some Pacific commentators expressed surprise at the scope of the agreement given PNG's membership of the Non-Aligned Movement (Henry Ivarature quoted in Swanston and Srinivasan 2023), though the agreement was in line with virtually every other DCA entered into by the US.

In 2023, the US also began reclaiming a Second World War-era airfield on Tinian Island in CNMI as part of its operational strategy of Agile Combat Employment, which calls for locating aircraft in as many locations as possible in the western Pacific to avoid enemy missile strikes (Nakamura 2023). It has also had a dedicated US Coast Guard vessel, USCGC Harriet Lane, operating in the region since 2024.

Yet for all the US's efforts to engage in the Pacific Islands region, questions remain about implementation. For example, while the USCGC Harriet Lane is capable of conducting long-range deployments, which are essential in the Pacific Islands given the distances involved, it is more than 30 years old (Felton 2023). Like other Famous-class cutters, the Harriet Lane is due for replacement in the coming decade (CRS 2023), but there are questions about whether this will occur given funding cuts and personnel shortages in the Coast Guard (Pulkkinen 2023). The Coast Guard, primarily a domestic facing agency, has experience in international deployments. The particular qualities of vessels deployed to the vast Pacific Ocean test the design of many Coast Guard ships, which requires ample endurance and a shallow draft. Recruitment also presents challenges for the Coast Guard, as many recruits have little interest in deploying overseas.

Conclusion

American strategy drives engagement with PICs. While there is tremendous goodwill amongst US diplomats and public servants engaging with the Pacific Islands region, their work is driven by China's challenge. Since World War II, the US has had limited engagement throughout the region. Historically,

Soviet interest in the growing number of independent PICs drove the US to greater engagement. That increased engagement was brought to a rapid close by the collapse of the USSR, removing a strategic competitor and vastly increasing calls on American attention to the newly independent former Soviet states.

Much of the US's focus has been on the northern part of the Pacific Islands region; that is the American priority. The southern parts of the region are, however, growing in importance for Washington. The US is engaging in concert with partner states such as Australia, Japan, and New Zealand. The effectiveness of this approach has yet to be judged.

In the meantime, the peculiarities of the US system test America's steadfastness. Consistent funding from Congress cannot be assumed. Every policy announcement must include an asterisk *depending on congressional funding*. This is nothing new, but for some PICs with little experience working with Washington, it may come as a surprise.

Note

1 This chapter draws, in part, on Joanne Wallis, Emily Conroy, and Cayleigh Stock, 'The United States as a 'Pacific Nation': Imaginary, Performance, and Spatialisation', *Geopolitics*, https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2024.2302421

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8 Australia's statecraft towards its 'Pacific family'

Joanne Wallis

Introduction

This chapter analyses the statecraft of the partner state that has long played the most active role in the Pacific Islands region: Australia. For decades Australia has deployed a range of tools of statecraft across the region, including providing more than half of all aid (although an influx of partners has seen this drop to approximately 40 percent of total aid), delivering security and governance assistance, leading numerous humanitarian and disaster relief responses, and conducting a series of interventions in response to instability. This statecraft has sought to influence Pacific Island countries (PICs) to see Australia as its 'partner of choice' (Wong and Conroy 2022). This has been driven primarily by Australia's strategic interests, and to a lesser extent by economic interests in the region's natural resources and by a perception that Australia has a 'substantial and special responsibility' in the region (Howard 2001; Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee, 2003). Since 2018 Australia has made determined efforts to increase its deployment of statecraft tools, through its 'Pacific step-up' policy under the conservative Coalition government and then its 'Building a stronger and more united Pacific family' policy under the progressive Labor government elected in May 2022. This reflects Australia's growing anxiety about the strategic consequences of the increasingly visible presence of its emerging strategic competitor, China, in the region.

This chapter begins by analysing the motivations and goals of Australia's statecraft in the Pacific Islands region. It then outlines the nature of Australia's contemporary Pacific policy, which includes the deployment both of material tools of statecraft, such as infrastructure financing, security assistance, and aid, and 'soft power' tools, particularly diplomacy, and the adoption of the 'Pacific family' strategic narrative to influence PICs to welcome its role in the region and to reject the presence of powers with interests potentially inimical to Australia. It concludes by arguing that, while Australia deploys by far the largest and most expensive range of tools of statecraft in the region, its ability to either influence, or less commonly coerce, PICs has been constrained by, most importantly, the agency of PICs and, to a lesser degree, by policy

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mistakes, missed opportunities, and unintended consequences. But it argues that this should not necessarily be a cause for anxiety in Canberra: although Australia has experienced statecraft 'losses', most notably the 2022 China–Solomon Islands security agreement, it remains the partner of choice for most PICs in southern parts of the region (its ally, the US, is the main partner of most Micronesian states). As Chapter 1 argues, this means that Australia has the breathing space to take a less reactive approach to China's statecraft in the region, but this must be accompanied by a rethink of Australia's attitudes towards, and assumptions about, PICs.

What are the motivations and goals of Australia's statecraft in the Pacific Islands region?

The primary motivation of Australia's statecraft in the Pacific Islands region is strategic: Australian governments have long identified that the security of the region sits only behind the security of Australia in the hierarchy of its strategic interests (Wallis 2017). This reflects Australia's geography: the region lies near the north and east of Australia, across the vital air and sea approaches that link Australia to its trading and defence partners in North America and Northeast Asia. Therefore, along with Indonesia, the Pacific Islands region will always be the 'area from or through which a military threat to Australia could most easily be posed' (Dibb 1986). This has encouraged successive Australian governments to adopt a policy of strategic denial: trying to position Australia as the primary power in the region and to exclude potentially threatening powers. The need for such a policy was demonstrated during the Second World War, when Japanese forces advanced through the region, threatening vital American supply lines to Australia.

During the Cold War, reflecting Australia's policy of strategic denial, the decolonisation of many PICs generated Australian concern about potential Soviet and Libyan influence. Australia responded by encouraging regionalism, believing that a regional security community would discourage PICs from forming close relationships with potentially hostile powers. In 1971, the South Pacific Forum (now known as the PIF) was founded to foster cooperation between independent Pacific Island countries, Australia, and New Zealand. Australia also encouraged the creation of the 1980 South Pacific Regional Trade and Economic Co-operation Agreement (which offered PIF members preferential trade access to Australia and New Zealand) and developed aid and defence cooperation programs.

In the relatively geopolitically benign post-Cold War environment, Australia's attention drifted from the Pacific Islands region. While there was political instability in Fiji, the Bougainville region of PNG, and Solomon Islands, Australia concluded that it should avoid military intervention unless its vital interests were threatened, there was a major humanitarian emergency, or if a PIC faced 'substantial external aggression' (Department of Defence, 2000). This meant that, although Australia cooperated with New Zealand and other PICs to facilitate a peace process in Bougainville, it resisted pressure

to respond to both the May 2000 civilian coup in Fiji and Solomon Islands. Prime Minister Bartholomew Ulufa'alu's requests for assistance with deteriorating security. This reluctance was reflected in the 2003 Foreign Policy White Paper, which stated that 'Australia cannot presume to fix the problems of the South Pacific countries' (DFAT, 2003). Instead, Australia's main interests in the region were economic, and it promoted the Pacific Agreement on Closer Economic Relations (PACER) with PICs and New Zealand in 2001 to advance trade liberalisation in the region.

After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Australia became concerned that 'weak' or 'failing' states in the region could provide launching pads for terrorist attacks or transnational crime (Wainwright 2003). Therefore, as the security situation in Solomon Islands declined, in 2003 Australia led the multilateral PIF-approved Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI), as well as smaller interventions in PNG and Nauru in 2004. A defining feature of these interventions was their whole-of-government approach, which saw Australian police officers and public servants assigned directly to PICs' institutions with the goal of strengthening governance and security institutions. However, in 2006 Australia declined to respond to a military coup in Fiji, partly because Fiji had a very well-trained and effective military, facilitated, in part, by many years of training and support from Australia under its defence cooperation program.

In 2008, Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd sought to recalibrate Australia's relationships in the Pacific Islands region through his 'Port Moresby Declaration'. The declaration claimed that Australia wanted a 'new era of cooperation' with PICs that respected their independence and worked with them based on 'partnership, mutual respect and mutual responsibility' (Rudd 2008). Australia accordingly agreed to bilateral Partnerships for Development with several PICs, created a seasonal worker program to facilitate Pacific labour mobility to Australia, and took steps to address climate change, including by ratifying the Kyoto Protocol. But Australia remained concerned about security, reflected by its 2012 national security strategy, which identified Australia's 'enduring interest in the security, stability and economic prosperity of the Pacific islands region', home to 'both fragile and developing nations' (Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2013, p. 7, 38, 30). The Defence White Paper 2013 envisaged that the Australian Defence Force could be involved in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, the evacuation of Australian citizens, and stability operations (Department of Defence, 2013).

During the 2010s, as China's presence in the region became increasingly visible, Australia began to experience anxiety about China's strategic intentions and what they might mean for Australia's security. China's interest in the region, accompanied by a range of other partners such as France, India, Indonesia, Japan, Taiwan, and the UK, empowered PICs to deploy a range of '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). This meant that, although Australia had vastly more economic, security, and defence resources than its neighbours, it had an increasingly constrained ability to influence events in the region (Wallis 2017).

The Australian government was reminded of the limits of its influence over PICs after the news of the April 2022 Solomon Islands-China security agreement leaked. Many Australian commentators interpreted this agreement as confirming their anxieties about China developing a military presence in the region (Shoebridge 2022). Anxieties about China's naval presence in the Pacific Islands region had been building since April 2018 reports that China was in talks to build a military base in Vanuatu. They were bolstered by Solomon Islands and Kiribati switching their diplomatic relations to China in 2019, and then by China attempting to lease a Second World War-era Japanese naval base in Solomon Islands and to update strategically located airstrips in Kiribati.

Australia sent then Minister for International Development and the Pacific Zed Seselja to Solomon Islands in April 2022 to express its concern about the security agreement. In response, Solomon Islands Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare criticised Australia for its lack of action to tackle climate change and for claims in the Australian media that Canberra should 'invade' Solomon Islands and 'topple its government' (Chung 2022). Then Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison's furious lobbying of Sogavare and other regional leaders, including PNG Prime Minister James Marape and then Fijian Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama, did not persuade Solomon Islands to abandon the deal. Indeed, after leading a military coup in 2006, Bainimarama had himself ignored and side-stepped Australia's attempts, through (limited) sanctions and attempts at diplomatic isolation, to coerce his military regime to return Fiji to democracy, instead looking east to seek closer relations with China and other partner states. Bainimarama initiated elections in 2014 only after he had amended the Fijian Constitution to virtually guarantee that his party would win government (which it did). In 2018, Marape accepted that Australia would fund and build the Coral Sea Cable to link PNG's internet network to Solomon Islands and Australia, which Australia offered to prevent Chinese telco Huawei from doing the job. But Marape's government then contracted Huawei to build PNG's domestic network – which connects to the cable – anyway.

This is why, within a week of Labor winning the May 2022 federal election, Australia's new Foreign Minister Penny Wong was en route to Fiji. Wong's visit sought to counter a simultaneous tour through seven PICs (plus Timor-Leste) by Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi. In the lead-up to Wang's tour, drafts of a communique and five-year action plan that China had proposed to the ten PICs with which it (then) had diplomatic relations were leaked in the media (Powles 2022). In Australia, these drafts were widely perceived to represent China attempting to expand its influence in the Pacific Islands region by deepening cooperation on a range of security and economic matters.

How is Australia using diplomacy in the Pacific Islands region?

At the 2017 PIF leaders' meeting, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull signalled a major rethink of Australia's relations with the South Pacific when

he committed Australia to 'step-up' its engagement (Turnbull 2017). This reflected Australia's recognition that it had not followed through on its commitment in the Port Moresby Declaration to reset its relations with the region. In November 2018, Prime Minister Scott Morrison fleshed out the 'step-up' policy during a major speech (Morrison 2018). It included tools of statecraft focused on enhancing development, security, diplomatic, and people-to-people links. A cross-agency Office of the Pacific based in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade was created in 2019 to oversee implementation.

Diplomacy formed an important tool of statecraft in the step-up. Australia opened a diplomatic mission in every member of the PIF, making it the only country to do so. However, Australia's leader-level diplomacy faced challenges, primarily because the Coalition government's domestic inaction on climate change undermined its relationships with PICs, who regard climate change as the 'single greatest threat' to the region (PIF, 2018). Indeed, although the Coalition government rhetorically recognised the threat posed by climate change, its domestic policy inaction and perceived efforts to stymie stronger collective commitments within the PIF (Fry 2019) undermined its ability to use diplomacy to (re)shape the beliefs, attitudes, and/or opinions of PICs in ways that favoured Australia.

The COVID-19 pandemic made Australia's leader-level diplomacy even more challenging, as most PICs closed their borders. This perhaps partly explained the lack of preparatory diplomacy to attempt to influence PICs to view favourably the AUKUS security partnership announced between Australia, the US, and the UK in September 2021. A key aspect of the announcement was the commitment of the US and the UK to help Australia develop nuclear-powered submarines (Morrison and Payne 2021). No PIC was consulted before the announcement. This generated anxiety in the region, given sensitivities about nuclear technology due to the legacy of the catastrophic human and environmental consequences of nuclear weapons testing in the region. As Kiribati President Taneti Maamau commented in response to the AUKUS announcement, 'Our people were victims of nuclear testing, we still have trauma. With that in mind, with anything to do with nuclear, we thought it would be a courtesy to raise it, to discuss it with your neighbours' (quoted in Grant 2021).

In response, Australia engaged in an extensive diplomatic effort, particularly after the election of the Labor government, to reassure PICs about its development of nuclear-powered submarines under the AUKUS partnership. Within a week of taking office, new Foreign Minister Penny Wong visited Fiji, where she delivered a major speech at the PIF (Wong, 2022). She then visited every member of the PIF (17, excluding Australia) at least once during her first year as Foreign Minister. The Labor government was particularly keen to differentiate its diplomacy on AUKUS from its Coalition predecessor. For example, during a visit to Samoa in 2023, the Minister for International Development and the Pacific Pat Conroy acknowledged that 'when the AUKUS announcement was originally made by the last government, there

was insufficient consultation. And that was disrespectful' (Conroy 2023). In contrast, Conroy was careful to stress that the Labor government consulted and briefed more than 60 countries before announcing the plan for how the submarines would be developed. Conroy acknowledged 'that consultation is really important, and that allowed us to ensure leaders of the Pacific that what we were doing is consistent with the Treaty of Rarotonga' (Conroy 2023). The Labor government has been particularly careful to emphasise that its involvement in AUKUS will not breach its international commitments, or its commitments under the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone, which was created by PIF members (including Australia) under the Treaty of Rarotonga in 1986. The non-proliferation community remains sceptical about Australia's reassurances, and has argued that the loophole exempting naval reactors from nuclear safeguards threatens efforts to limit the production and use of the highly enriched uranium required to make nuclear weapons (Kapetas 2021). However the Labor government has had some success persuading Pacific leaders to support the AUKUS partnership, including prominent leaders such as Fijian Prime Minister Sitveni Rabuka (Dziedzic 2023). But other leaders remain concerned (Pacific Elders Voice, 2023).

Australia also made diplomatic missteps when announcing the Partners in the Blue Pacific initiative with New Zealand, the US, the UK, and Japan in 2022 (Germany, Canada, and South Korea later joined, with the European Union, France, and India as observers). This informal mechanism is intended to 'support prosperity, resilience, and security in the Pacific' with the aims of delivering results more effectively and efficiently, bolstering 'Pacific regionalism', and expanding opportunities for cooperation between the Pacific and the rest of the world (DFAT, 2022b). However, Australia and its partners only formally consulted the Pacific heads of mission in Washington on 23 and 24 June 2022, with the public announcement coming on 24 June 2022. No PIC, or the PIF as the peak multinational regional institution, was invited to participate in the initiative. The members of the initiative only held their first meeting with Pacific leaders on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in September 2022.

How is Australia using its development statecraft in the Pacific Islands region?

Australia has long been the largest aid donor in the Pacific Islands region (currently providing more than 40 percent of all aid), and in the last five years has emerged as a major regional lender (Lowy Institute, 2024). Notably, apparently to counter Chinese Belt and Road Initiative infrastructure lending, in 2019 Australia created an A$2 billion (now $4 billion) Australian Infrastructure Financing Facility for the Pacific and allocated an extra A$1bn to Export Finance Australia, its export finance and insurance corporation to support investment. Australia has funded major infrastructure projects, including: the PNG Electrification Partnership to electrify 70 percent of PNG by 2030

(in cooperation with the US, New Zealand, and Japan); the Coral Sea Cable to connect PNG and Solomon Islands to Australia via an undersea cable system; and to redevelop the Republic of Fiji Military Forces' Blackrock Camp. The latter two projects were reportedly direct counters to offers by China. In 2022 Australia also financed Telstra's acquisition of the largest telecommunications company in the region, Digicel, after China Mobile expressed an interest.

An important aspect of Australia's development statecraft has been its emphasis on labour mobility for Pacific workers.[1] Since April 2022, Australia has offered a single labour program for people from certain PICs: the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme. The PALM scheme consolidated two prior programs: the Seasonal Worker Programme (SWP) and the Pacific Labour Scheme (PLS). The SWP began in 2008 as a pilot to meet Australian horticultural labour shortages and to contribute to economic development in the Pacific Islands region. It became permanent in 2012. The PLS began in 2018 and offered Pacific workers three-year visas to work in low- and semi-skilled occupations in Australia. The PALM scheme allows people from nine PICs and Timor-Leste to work in Australia in a sponsored position for either: short-term (seasonal) contracts of up to nine months (although multi-season visas are available that allow people to work for nine months each year for four years, provided they return home at the end of each seasonal contract); or long-term contracts of up to four years.

The major developmental benefit of labour mobility is the opportunity for Pacific workers to generate remittances, which are often used to support their families and invest in housing or businesses. In some PICs, remittances constitute an important source of financial support; in Samoa they constitute about 18 percent of GDP, and in Tonga about 40 percent of GDP. Indeed, when compared to aid, labour mobility has been framed as providing PICs with 'greater agency' (Ackman and Taulealo 2020). Therefore, Australia's labour mobility schemes were popular, and demand exceeded their capacity to absorb workers (Howes 2020). One survey of Pacific workers found that 91 percent would recommend the SWP scheme (World Bank, 2018), and the average worker returned to Australia between three and four times (Howes 2018). A subsequent study found that 'most workers are very satisfied with their experience across many dimensions, including earnings, employment, and accommodation arrangements' (Doan, Dornan and Edwards 2023). However, in another study, some workers reported finding prolonged separation from their families difficult and were aware of the 'stark asymmetries' inherent in its structure and of 'patterns of exploitation' (Stead 2021). There have been reports of Pacific workers being abused by their employers, including employers deducting too many expenses from workers' pay, as workers are obliged to reimburse their employers for their living, health insurance, and travel expenses (Rice 2021). There have also been reports of unsafe working conditions and deaths (Thompson 2018), about poor living conditions and limited access to medical care, leading to adverse health effects (Bailey 2020).

Recognising that labour mobility is a potentially valuable tool of economic statecraft, the Labor government pledged to reform the PALM scheme. In its 2023 budget, it committed A$370.8 million over four years to 'expand and improve' the PALM scheme, to 'support sustainable growth and improve support for workers in line with Australian and Pacific aspirations' (Commonwealth of Australia, 2023a). Significantly, A$27.3 million of this spending is directed to the Office of the Fair Work Ombudsman 'to ensure workers' rights are protected, including through undertaking education, monitoring, and compliance and enforcement activities' (Commonwealth of Australia, 2023).

In response to population pressures and lack of economic opportunities in several parts of the region, in 2023 the Labor government also created a Pacific Engagement Visa (PEV) to allocate 3000 permanent migration opportunities annually via lottery to Pacific people (DFAT, 2022a). While this responded to longstanding calls from the region for improved access to Australia, the utility of the PEV as a tool of statecraft that would positively reshape Pacific peoples' beliefs, attitudes, and/or opinions about Australia was undermined by delays in its implementation (including missing its announced 1 July 2023 start date after difficulties securing approval in the Senate (Howes and Vueti 2023)). They were further undermined by questions about its design: it was unclear whether support would be provided to facilitate migrants' travel to Australia, how 'potential brain-drain risks' would be addressed, whether migrants from 'climate-threatened' PICs would be prioritised, whether existing PALM workers would have access to the visa, and whether substantial consultations with Pacific leaders and other stakeholder groups were undertaken before the scheme was announced (Rimon et al. 2023; Chapter 4). Reflecting these concerns, only nine PICs (FSM, Fiji, Nauru, Palau, PNG, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu) and Timor-Leste opted into the first iteration of the scheme, opening on 3 June 2024 (DFAT, 2022a). However, this did not stop more than 50,000 people applying for the first round of the lottery in 2024 (Wiseman 2024).

Security statecraft

Security and defence tools of statecraft have formed a major aspect of Australia's efforts in the Pacific Islands region. As Australia's defence statecraft is analysed in detail in Chapter 5, this chapter will focus on security statecraft. As part of the Pacific step-up, in 2019 Australia created the Australia Pacific Security College at the Australian National University in Canberra to strengthen the capacity of Pacific officials and a Pacific Fusion Centre, initially in Canberra and then later in Vanuatu, to promote regional maritime-domain awareness. Australia continues to maintain an extensive role in supporting Pacific police forces, both by providing bilateral support through the Pacific Community for Law Enforcement Cooperation Program through the Pacific Islands Chiefs of Police, and its Pacific Police Development Program, which provides capacity building across a range of regional mechanisms. Reflecting its concern

about potentially hostile actors developing a presence in the region, Australia also devotes considerable support to tackling transnational crime through the Pacific Transnational Crime Network (through the Pacific Islands Chiefs of Police) and the Transnational Serious Organised Crime Pacific Taskforce. Australia's support to policing received a further boost when PIF leaders endorsed its Pacific Policing Initiative at their 2024 leaders' meeting. This initiative will involve Australia committing A$400 million over five years to create up to four regional police training Centres of Excellence, create a multi-country Pacific Police Support Group, and open a Policing Development and Coordination Hub in Brisbane, Australia (Albanese 2024).

Australia has also decided that bilateral security agreements with PICs are an important element of its security statecraft in the Pacific Islands region, which seeks to influence PICs to continue to perceive Australia as the region's primary security partner. Australia agreed on a security treaty with Solomon Islands in 2017, a vuvale (friendship) partnership with Fiji in 2019, a comprehensive security and economic partnership with PNG in 2020 and a security agreement in 2023, a security agreement with Vanuatu in 2022, an economic and security-focused memorandum of understanding with Kiribati in 2023, an economic and security-focused bilateral partnership agreement with Samoa in 2023, and the Falepili Union security treaty with Tuvalu in 2023.

Although Australia has a range of longstanding bilateral defence and security relationships that reflect its unique history and geography, the wisdom of pursuing bilateral security agreements is questionable. Pacific leaders have made clear their preference for regional approaches to security – this was the main ground on which they rebuffed China's 2022 attempt to secure support for its economic and security pact. There is the risk that, by proliferating bilateral security agreements, Australia will undermine developing security regionalism led by the PIF. This may, in turn, make it easier for China to attempt to achieve more bilateral security agreements.

There are also questions about Australia offering explicit security guarantees to PICs. For example, since PNG's independence, Australia has been reluctant to provide an explicit security guarantee to PNG (although one was implied under the 1987 Joint Declaration of Principles) because of its shared land border with Indonesia. More pragmatically, given PNG's large size, Australia likely lacks the capacity to respond to a major security crisis on its own (beyond securing key air and seaports to evacuate its citizens). Under the Falepili Union with Tuvalu, Australia provides its most explicit security guarantee (in even more definitive words than its ANZUS alliance with the US and New Zealand). But Australia would face a range of practical difficulties in responding to external aggression against Tuvalu, which is very far away from Australia. While Tuvalu is unlikely to face any external aggression, there is the possibility that China may engage in low-level harassment of Tuvalu, such as encroaching into its exclusive economic zone, to test Australia's resolve (Graham and Shrimpton 2023). If Australia failed to respond, this could raise

doubts in the Pacific Islands region about Australia's reliability as a primary security partner.

The politics of the Falepili Union also raises doubts about its utility as a tool of statecraft. The treaty gave Australia an effective veto over Tuvalu's future security and defence engagements, which was desirable given Australia's anxiety about China's strategic intentions in the region. But Tuvalu arguably agreed because it faces existential challenges from worsening climate change, and the treaty created a special visa arrangement for Tuvalu citizens to live, work, and study in Australia. On one reading, Australia took advantage of Tuvalu's vulnerability (to which Australia, as a major emitter, arguably contributed) to pursue its own security interests. Indeed, criticism of the treaty focused on its impact on Tuvalu's sovereignty, its agreement without widespread public consultation (Sopoaga 2023), the difficulties Tuvaluans may face migrating to Australia (Kitara 2023), and its failure to require Australia to commit to greater emissions reductions (Kitara and Farbotko 2023).

Beyond bilateralism, Australia has sought to bolster its security cooperation with allies and partners in the Pacific Islands region. As discussed in Chapter 5, Australia has long worked with New Zealand and France under the FRANZ Arrangement to coordinate humanitarian and disaster relief in the region. It has also coordinated with France, New Zealand, and the US under the 'Pacific Quad' (the Quadrilateral Defence Coordination Group).

'Soft power' statecraft

Since 2018, Australia has deployed several soft power tools of statecraft. Australia has developed numerous policies aimed at building people-to-people links, which are seen as an important way to influence recipient states, actors, or individuals to develop positive beliefs, attitudes, and/or opinions about Australia. These policies have aimed at building cultural, sporting, educational, and church linkages to the Pacific Islands region. This has included: sports partnerships facilitated by PacificAusSports; church partnerships through the Pacific Church Partnerships Program; education partnerships through investments in Pacific education programs, as well as scholarship schemes such as the Australia Awards for Pacific students to study in Australia (see Chapter 3); and support for the Pacific media through the Pacific Media Assistance Scheme (DFAT, n.d.).

The Australian government has also invested more in Australia's Pacific broadcasting, which is a key soft power tool of statecraft as it can provide a platform for publicising positive stories about Australia's involvement in the region. This has included producing more content about the region for Australian audiences and increased Australian broadcasting in the region. This is significant because, previous conservative Coalition governments had made large cuts to Australian television and shortwave broadcasting in the region (Dobell, Heriot and Garrett 2018). As noted in Chapter 1, China recognised the value of broadcasting as a soft power tool, and quickly signed a deal to

broadcast TV news in Vanuatu. It also took up many of the shortwave radio frequencies that Australia abandoned and has established Chinese newspapers in many PICs.

Australia has also deployed a strategic narrative in the region, that of Australia and PICs being 'connected as members of a Pacific family' (Morrison 2018; Wallis 2021a). This strategic narrative seeks both to encourage PICs to identify Australia as a principal partner for the region and, guided by a policy of strategic denial, by implication to try to exclude states that are not perceived to share the same apparently warm relationship (Wallis, 2023). When first articulating this narrative, then Prime Minister Scott Morrison framed Australia's relations with PICs as based on 'respect, equality and openness' (Morrison 2018). Both the Coalition and Labor governments have articulated an explicitly emotional underpinning of the narrative, with Morrison claiming that it was based on 'respect, love, commitment' (Morrison 2018). New Foreign Minister Penny Wong has similarly argued that 'Australians are part of the Pacific family. Families are about care, love and forgiveness. But they are also about duty and loyalty, looking out for each other, and listening to each other' (Wong, 2022). While the Pacific family narrative could be interpreted as a welcome continuation of the approach articulated in the 'Port Moresby Declaration', Australia has a history of articulating new narratives about the region and then abandoning them, which raises questions about the utility of the Pacific family narrative as a tool of statecraft to influence PICs' beliefs, attitudes, and opinions about Australia. For example, in 1988, former Foreign Minister Gareth Evans articulated a policy of 'constructive commitment', whereby Australia would deal with Pacific states 'on a basis of sovereign equality and mutual respect' (Evans 1988). This approach soon lapsed and was followed by a period of interventionism in the region.

Conclusion

Australia deploys by far the largest and most expensive range of tools of statecraft in the Pacific Islands region. And Australia has considerably increased its involvement in the region since 2018. Notably, the Office of the Pacific, which was created in 2019 to provide cross-agency coordination, now has 330 Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade personnel working in it, as well as secondees from across the government. This is in addition to Australian diplomats and advisers posted at missions throughout the region, including in every PIF member country. Australian aid to the region continues to increase, as does its infrastructure lending, high-level diplomatic visits, scholarships, training and capacity building, openness to labour mobility, and from 2024, openness to permanent Pacific migration. Through its Pacific Maritime Security Program and support for the Forum Fisheries Agency (see Chapter 5) and Pacific Fusion Centre, Australia is the leading provider of support for PICs to police their maritime domains. Australia also remains the main partner state to provide humanitarian and disaster relief, and as a PIF member, is the partner

state most likely to be invited to respond to any regional instability. On any measure, Australia is the Pacific Island region's partner of choice.

Despite this, Australia's ability to either influence, or less commonly coerce, PICs has been constrained by five factors. As I argued in a previous book (Wallis 2017), the first and most significant limit on Australia's statecraft in the Pacific Islands region is the agency, sovereignty, and ability of PICs to find alternative partners. These constraints have become more visible since strategic competition between China and the US has worsened from the 2010s. But even in 2006, the limits of Australia's influence were illustrated by its failure to mount a substantive response to the military coup in Fiji and the failure of its coercive tactics, based on trying to diplomatically isolate Fiji, to encourage the military regime to return to democracy. These limits were again demonstrated by Australia's failure to dissuade Solomon Islands from signing the security agreement with China, as Australia has long had the most substantial presence of any state in Solomon Islands, not least through the 2003–2017 RAMSI. The limits of Australia's statecraft demonstrate that there is not a neat causal relationship between a state deploying tools of statecraft and gaining the ability to influence or coerce a PIC.

The second constraint on Australia's statecraft has been its policy mistakes. The most obvious was made by the Coalition government: failing to take serious action to address climate change and, at times, acting as a spoiler on regional climate efforts (Fry 2019). While the new Labor government has strengthened Australia's climate policy, there is concern that its climate commitments may not be as extensive as PICs would like – or indeed, need – to help prevent catastrophic climate change.

The third constraint on Australia's statecraft has been missed opportunities. These include failing to anticipate and quickly address problems with its labour mobility schemes, not consulting with PICS about new mechanisms such as the Partners in the Blue Pacific initiative, or ensuring that these mechanisms were led by PICs and respectful of PIF centrality. And, as described, Australia's emphasis on bilateral security agreements as a security tool of statecraft may undermine regionalism and generate unrealistic expectations about Australia's capacity to respond to threats or crises.

The fourth challenge to the effectiveness of Australia's statecraft has been a tendency to adopt a reactive 'whack a mole' approach to deploying tools of statecraft to directly counter Chinese initiatives in the region (Wallis 2021b). Australia's 2020 response to news that China had agreed to fund a A$204 million fishery industrial park on Daru Island in PNG demonstrates the shortcomings of this approach. As Australia was concerned that the facility would give China a presence only a few kilometres from its territory, it quickly countered with an A$30 million agreement with PNG for an 'economic empowerment program' on Daru. But while there has been no substantive progress on the Chinese project, it is unlikely that Australia's reaction influenced this. The COVID-19 pandemic may have delayed progress, but the more plausible explanation is that the Chinese project was an 'outlandishly ambitious' 'mirage'

that will 'never eventuate' (Strangio 2021). While Australian development initiatives on Daru are welcome, whether this initiative was the best use of Australia's resources – both to deliver long-term development in PNG and to try to influence PNG- is unclear.

The fifth challenge has been the tension between Australia's broader strategic interests, crystallised in its concerns about strategic competition between its ally, the US, and China, in the 'Indo-Pacific', and its interests in the Pacific Islands region. PICs have made clear their concerns about being dragged into this competition and forced to make a 'choice' between the competitors (see, for example: Taylor 2019). This tension is exemplified by Australia's decision to develop nuclear-powered submarines under the AUKUS partnership. While this Australia sees these submarines as key to advancing its strategic interests in the wider Indo-Pacific, particularly strengthening its alliance with the US, many PICs are concerned both about the nuclear technology and the risk that these submarines will further militarise their region (de Jong 2024).

Overall, while Australia has experienced what it would understand as statecraft 'losses' – most notably the 2022 China–Solomon Islands security agreement, which then opposition foreign affairs spokesperson, now Foreign Minister, Penny Wong, described as 'the worst Australian foreign policy blunder in the Pacific since the end of world war two' (quoted in Hurst and Butler 2022) – it remains the partner of choice for PICs in the southern parts of the region (its ally, the US, is the main partner of most PICs in the northern Pacific). But Australia needs to be careful not to rest on its laurels. PICs have heard Australian governments announce big policy resets before, but remain understandably sceptical about how much implementation follows, and importantly, whether Australian attitudes toward, and assumptions about, the region will substantively change. This highlights that more spending is not the only answer for how Australia should use tools of statecraft to improve its relationships with PICs, and consequently advance its strategic interests in the region. There also needs to be a corresponding rethink of the assumptions that have underpinned Australia's Pacific policy, and a broader reimagining of Australia's approach to the region.

Such a reimagining could draw on the concept of the 'Blue Pacific', which PIF leaders have articulated to emphasise the agency, autonomy, and potential of Pacific Island countries (see Chapter 6).[2] This suggests that Australia needs to find ways to respect the autonomy and resilience of PICs, including how they are exercising their agency to shape their own futures in their relations with other powers. This would require some humility from Australia, including an acknowledgement that it does not have the power to influence or coerce PICs to follow its lead.

PICs emphasise regional cooperation and collective diplomacy as part of their Blue Pacific concept. As one of the only two non-island state members of the PIF, Australia is well-placed to facilitate regional coordination to respond to geopolitical and other security challenges. For example, although the 2018 Boe Declaration commits PICs to create national security strategies, and

many PICs have done so (often with Australian assistance), Australia has yet to reciprocate. Doing so would provide an opportunity for Australia to have conversations with the PICs about how it understands security, and to bolster the regional security architecture coalescing around the Boe Declaration.

In the spirit of humility, Australia should also recognise that it can learn from PICs' experiences and perspectives when making its Pacific policy. The Labor government has put a welcome emphasis on 'listening' PICs as part of its Pacific family narrative, but to reset Australia's relationships in the region, that needs to be followed by understanding – and action. There are myriad opportunities for Australia to respond to Pacific proposals relating to, for example, greater education and skills training, improved trade pathways, enhanced civil society partnerships, and opportunities for digital development and transformation.

This reimagining would also require greater empathy from Australia, including recognising that its behaviour – particularly as the colonial power in PNG and Nauru – has contributed to several of the challenges that the region now faces. The Labor government has developed a First Nations foreign policy that incorporates First Nations identities, perspectives, and practices into Australia's overseas engagement, which has been welcomed by several Pacific leaders, but this policy faces the challenge of Australia's own incomplete domestic reckoning with its settler-colonial history. Australia also faces the challenge of reconciling its broader strategic interests, including in maintaining close relations with its major security ally, the US, and its increasingly important strategic partner, France, which both hold colonies in the region whose indigenous populations receive considerable support in their self-determination efforts from PICs.

There are no easy answers to the challenges that Australia faces in the Pacific Islands region. But the current Labor government is the most focused on the region of any government in Australia's history. The question is whether it can balance its relationships in the Pacific Islands region with its broader strategic and economic interests.

Notes

1 This discussion of labour mobility draws on Wallis, J, 2023, 'The enclosure and exclusion of Australia's 'Pacific family'', *Political Geography,* 106: 102935, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2023.102935

2 This discussion is drawn from Wallis J (2021), 'Contradictions in Australia's Pacific Islands discourse', *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 75(5), pp. 487–506.

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9 New Zealand's statecraft 'in and of the Pacific'

Henrietta McNeill

Introduction

New Zealand has long described itself as a Pacific nation, one that is not simply geographically 'in' the region, but also culturally 'of' the region. With a proportionally large Pasifika diaspora and Polynesian connections with New Zealand's tangata whenua (Indigenous Māori people), statecraft in the Pacific Islands region by New Zealand differs significantly from that of Australia and the United States (US). New Zealand has a traditionally strong relationship with the Pacific. This chapter explores how these connections are sought and maintained through historical and constitutional mechanisms, migration and diaspora, Indigenous foreign policy, mainstreaming Pasifika into diplomacy and security assistance, and general Pacific literacy of the population in New Zealand. Although New Zealand maintains an independent foreign policy driven by its values, it is often called upon by other partners to assist in facilitating relationships in the region, given the effectiveness of its statecraft. I first examine the consistency and longevity of New Zealand's statecraft towards the Pacific Islands region, and then delve into the period post-2018. Aotearoa New Zealand's statecraft over this period developed through three governments with distinct foreign policies towards the Pacific, which I depict within this chapter.

Consistency, longevity, and depth in New Zealand's statecraft

New Zealand's long and deep diasporic ties with the region make its soft power approaches, particularly people-to-people links, so natural that they are often forgotten as explicit tools of statecraft. New Zealand had a wave of Polynesian migrants from its then-territories (Samoa, Cook Islands, Tokelau, and Niue) in the 1950s and 1960s. Movement has continued post-independence through Niueans and Cook Islanders having New Zealand citizenship and thus free movement for any purpose;[1] and the Samoan quota, which since 1964 has enabled 1100 Samoan citizens to annually access (via ballot) permanent residence to New Zealand. This was expanded in 2002 with a Pacific Access Category, giving the same conditions (via ballot) annually to 75 i-Kiribati, 75 Tuvaluan, 250 Tongan, and 250 Fijian citizens. These processes, plus

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the virtue of Tokelauans have New Zealand citizenship through non-self-governing territorial status,[2] mean that over time the diaspora has grown, becoming intergenerational. As Salesa (2017, p. 1) argues, 'Auckland and New Zealand are becoming more Pacific by the hour', with approximately 8% of the population identifying as Pacific – influencing New Zealand's overall Pacific literacy and overall approach to the region.

New Zealanders are becoming more cognisant of the country's history in the Pacific, with 85% of New Zealanders aware of the Dawn Raids (which will soon be taught in the New Zealand curriculum) and almost half of New Zealanders believing that colonisation had a negative impact on Pacific nations, acknowledging that New Zealand 'introduced diseases… [and] used their resources without good compensation' (quoted in PCF, 2022). Pacific studies is taught in New Zealand universities, most prominently at the University of Auckland, where Fale Pasifika is located, and at the Macmillan Brown Centre for Pacific Studies at the University of Canterbury. Pacific languages are taught in secondary school curriculums and tertiary institutes, and the Centre for Pacific Languages teaches free online courses in language and culture, including oratory (high) Samoan for those being granted tufale (speaking chief) roles in their communities. Pacific language weeks (representing Rotuman, Samoan, Kiribati, Cook Islands Māori, Tongan, Tuvaluan, Fijian, Niuean, Tokelauan, Papua New Guinean Tok Pisin, and Solomon Islands Pidgin languages) are an annual feature, as are cultural festivals such as Polyfest; Pasifika foods at markets and fine dining restaurants; Pacific-directed television, news, and movies; and a heavy presence of Pasifika peoples in New Zealand sporting teams, including making up more than half of the professional rugby players in the country. These people-to-people cultural aspects have mainstreamed Pasifika culture into all New Zealanders' lives.

In addition to permanent migration, there is also a flow of temporary migration influencing soft power. New Zealand has provided tertiary scholarships for Pacific Islanders since 1945, nowadays through the Manaaki New Zealand scholarship scheme. There are also short-term training scholarships available for professionals from Pacific states and Timor-Leste. New Zealand has had seasonal work programmes for Pacific Islanders since 2007 and increased the cap annually – now sitting at 19,500 workers who receive pastoral care and skills development in addition to their contracted work. Pacific citizens have been known to return for more than 12 seasons of seasonal work. Going the other way, New Zealanders have been volunteering in the Pacific Islands region since 1962 through the government-funded Volunteer Service Abroad Te Tūao Tāwāhi, which focuses on skills development and relationship-building over decades. In addition, RNZ and New Zealand news programmes are broadcast into homes around the Pacific region, as are New Zealand television shows like the soap opera Shortland Street.

In terms of security and defence, New Zealand's search and rescue zone spans from Antarctica to Tokelau, incorporating Polynesia. The New Zealand Defence Force responds to multiple search and rescue incidents per year and

focuses their humanitarian efforts on the Pacific Islands region. New Zealand deploys a whole-of-government response to disasters, including relief supplies; medical assistance; emergency management personnel; logistics, telecommunications, and other technical support; and financial assistance via non-governmental organisations. New Zealand works closely with France and Australia to respond to disasters under the FRANZ Arrangement [1992]. New Zealand also works closely with Pacific states to provide support for disaster risk reduction, particularly around drought preparedness, monitoring volcanic activity, and building the capacity of national disaster management offices in Niue, Tokelau, Samoa, Tonga, and Cook Islands.

New Zealand is an active member of the regional patchworked architecture: as a member of the PIF, Pacific Community, and all CROP organisations; host of the Pacific Islands Chiefs of Police secretariat; and member and significant donor to the Oceania Customs Organisation and Pacific Immigration Development Community. These are long-standing relationships which New Zealand nurtures as part of its ongoing statecraft with the region. New Zealand has long-standing law enforcement relationships with the Pacific through capacity building, drug and cash detector dog training, and embedded advisors in law enforcement agencies in Fiji, Solomon Islands, Bougainville, Vanuatu, and Tonga, among others. It posts defence attachés to Tonga and Fiji; technical advisors across the region, including in Cook Islands and Timor-Leste; and four defence personnel in Solomon Islands as part of the Solomon Islands International Assistance Force alongside Australia and Fiji. New Zealand holds regular bilateral security talks with Pacific Island states and incorporates security issues into wider partnership agreements it holds with these states.

New Zealand is a member of PACER Plus, and contributes about 10% of total aid to the Pacific (Ratuva 2017). There has been consistency in these areas over time. Like other partners though, things changed politically from 2018: the period to which I now turn.

Pacific Reset

In 2018, under Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's first government, Aotearoa New Zealand prioritised the Pacific Islands region – launching the 'Pacific Reset'. This policy dedicated more than 60% of New Zealand's aid assistance towards the region; increased diplomatic representation both in the region, with ten additional posts in Samoa, Tonga, Fiji, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Kiribati, and Honolulu, and four in Brussels, Tokyo, Beijing, and New York advocating for Pacific issues; and increased investment into cultural and sporting diplomacy, climate financing; military cooperation, people-to-people links, and the establishment of Pasifika TV (Powles 2021). New Zealand's whole-of-government approach[3] led to increased security cooperation with the region – while as aforementioned some programmes such as the Pacific Detector Dog Programme have been running for over 15 years, they were expanded

and formalised to support additional countries in the region (NZP 2024). In other cases, new programmes, including the New Zealand Transnational Crime Unit, were established to share intelligence on transnational criminal activities and criminal deportations with counterparts in the region through existing security institutions such as the Pacific Transnational Crime Coordination Centre (New Zealand Customs Service 2022).

The Reset was managed through five principles of engagement: understanding, friendship, mutual benefit, collective impact, and sustainability. These principles reflected a strategic narrative of Aotearoa New Zealand's Pasifika identity (Powles 2021): driven by its geography as surrounded by the Pacific Ocean; constitutional responsibilities to Tokelau, Cook Islands, Niue, and Samoa (the latter through the Treaty of Friendship); and New Zealand's significant Pasifika population reflecting close historical and contemporary ties with tangata whenua, people-to-people links, and represented strongly in Ardern's cabinet.

The Reset was outwardly described as driven by the 'growing dissatisfaction and concern with the highly transnational nature of New Zealand's relations with the Pacific' (Powles 2021, p. 32) with then-Prime Minister Ardern stating that 'we can do better, and we will' (RNZ 2018). While the public rhetoric from then-Foreign Minister Winston Peters 'stringently denied' that the Reset was established to counter China's increasing influence in the region, and instead resembled renewed engagement by New Zealand, subsequent analysis found 'considerable circumstantial evidence' that 'China is a factor in the Reset' (Iati 2021, p. 145, 146). Strategic environments were discussed in other defence documents, and New Zealand's national interests were raised as aspects of its foreign policy – but it was mostly inferred that it was a rising China generating these concerns (Powles 2021). While China was sometimes listed amongst other players in the increasingly crowded Pacific environment in media interviews with the Foreign Minister, it was not singled out by the New Zealand government as the core driver, assumed as the 'quiet part' of the Reset.

Instead, Ardern suggested that the foreign policy was driven by the importance of New Zealand's anti-nuclear stance and her government's prioritisation of climate change mitigation and adaptation (RNZ 2018). She famously (and often, throughout her leadership) linked the two, stating that 'climate change is my generation's nuclear-free moment' (quoted in Ewing 2017). The newly-elected government proposed a humanitarian visa pathway for those likely to be displaced by climate change, but shortly into the Reset moved away from this policy, instead acknowledging that it was unlikely to work in a Pacific context due to conversations with Pacific Islanders which reflected their 'their desire for self-determination and a collective solution rather than an individualised visa approach' (Hall 2019). This change of New Zealand policy based on Pacific interests is reflective of the move from 'donor/recipient' relations with PICs towards 'frank discussions on regional challenges and opportunities' that the Reset intended (ERS 2018). Instead, New Zealand turned

to advocating for climate change mitigation – with Ardern using her 2018 leader's address at the United Nations to reiterate the PIF statement in the Boe Declaration that climate change is the single biggest threat to the Pacific, and state the 'grinding reality in hearing someone from a Pacific Island talk about where the sea was when they were a child and the potential loss of their entire village as an adult' (Ardern 2018).

The Reset saw an increased intensity in diplomatic engagement with PICs: hosting leaders, parliamentarians, and officials on regular occasions in New Zealand for high-level meetings and training. In the first year of the Reset, Ardern first led a mission (with ministers, media, and NGOs) to Samoa, Cook Islands, Tonga, and Niue; later that year went to Nauru for the PIF Leader's Meeting with the Foreign Affairs Minister; and attended the 2018 APEC Summit in Port Moresby. Then Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Peters led two missions covering Fiji, Kiribati, Solomon Islands, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu; and there were another 21 ministerial or parliamentary under-secretary level that year alone. In the second year, Foreign Minister Peters visited Cook Islands, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Fiji, PNG, and Samoa; the Minister for Pacific Peoples led a delegation to Samoa, Tonga, and Niue; and Ardern attended the PIF in Tuvalu. Ardern embraced the Pacific's family-based values in her statecraft, by bringing her newborn daughter to the PIF Leaders' meeting in Nauru, and in 2019 was the first Prime Minister to travel to Tokelau in 15 years, alongside her father who at the time was the Tokelauan. Administrator (appointed by a previous government). One year into the Reset, it was recommended by Cabinet that the 'increased tempo of activity in the Pacific under the Reset should be considered the new normal for New Zealand's regional engagement' (ERS 2018: 9).

Unfortunately, official visits in both directions were suddenly halted in early 2020 with the COVID-19 pandemic closing borders. New Zealand, like other partners, pivoted to pandemic diplomacy, supporting the Pacific-led Pacific Humanitarian Pathway financially, and with technical and resource support. New Zealand also moved quickly to ensure Pacific workers in New Zealand on seasonal worker schemes were protected and provided them hardship payments (Wallis and McNeill 2021). While several of New Zealand's diplomatic missions globally had to temporarily close during the pandemic as diplomats repatriated home, New Zealand's diplomats remained in the Pacific – showing solidarity, which was well-received in the region. New Zealand's long-standing volunteer programme pivoted to online assistance with partner organisations.

Pacific Resilience

In late 2020, a landslide election in New Zealand retained Jacinda Arden as Prime Minister, although removed the need for a coalition government, which meant Nanaia Mahuta became New Zealand's first female Māori Foreign Minister. In-person statecraft was still limited by pandemic borders, although the change in foreign policy leadership enabled a shift towards an Indigenous

foreign policy. This shift was lauded abroad – particularly in light of New Zealand's successful statecraft in their culturally-based intervention in the 1997 Bougainville Peace Process – but under closer scrutiny, the policy appeared to be lacking in implementation (Evett 2022). In her inaugural foreign policy speech to the diplomatic corps, Mahuta (2021a) outlined an Indigenous foreign policy framework based on the principles of 'partnership and mutual respect' within Te Tiriti o Waitangi, including the values of manaakitanga (kindness/reciprocity of goodwill), whanaungatanga (connectedness), kohitangitanga (collective benefits/shared aspiration), and kaitiakitanga (intergenerational stewardship) (Mahuta 2021a). This highlighted an independent foreign policy modelled on Te Tiriti, which Ardern later repeated (Smith and Holster 2023), centring indigenous connections and worldviews – a key way in which to engage diplomatically with the Pacific Islands region.

Mahuta linked the Māori worldview with the existing strategic narrative of New Zealand's Pasifika identity: 'Aotearoa New Zealand's identity is drawn from our Polynesian heritage' and 'Aotearoa has historical, cultural, social, linguistic and kin connections across the Pacific all of which links us to the significant diaspora communities here. We refer to the Blue Pacific Continent as Te Moana-nui-a-Kiwa' (Mahuta 2021a). Ardern doubled down on the strategic narrative, at the United Nations General Assembly stating 'We are a nation that is both of the Pacific and within it' (Ardern 2022).

In this vein, Mahuta announced a change in New Zealand's Pacific-facing foreign policy building from the previous Reset, to one of 'Pacific Resilience,' which she described as a 'natural next step as we look at how to respond to the significant challenges of the here and now, founded on an authentic and values-based "Pacific Way"' (Mahuta 2021b).[4] In light of the pandemic, resilience was seen as a way to strengthen the region's economic, health, development, and security prospects. The Pacific Resilience policy highlighted existing work: such as the Pacific Public Service Fale for government administration across the region; climate change advocacy internationally; and the efforts of New Zealand government agencies 'such as Customs, Immigration, New Zealand Police, and Aviation Security [which] have long standing relationships with their Pacific counterparts' (Mahuta 2021b). She also announced an increase in spending towards climate financing for adaptation measures. In addition, there was NZD$4million to underwrite the Moana Pasifika rugby team to play in the Super Rugby competition. But most of all, this shift was about embedding Pacific cultural frameworks in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade's approach to engaging with the Pacific, through the principles of tātai hono (recognition of deep and enduring whakapapa/genealogical connections), tātou (all of us together), whāia te taumata ōhanga (a journey towards a circular economy), turou hawaiiki (navigating together), and arongia ki rangiātea (a focus towards excellence).

Despite the Pacific Resilience policy explicitly stating that it would be a proponent of the Pacific Way (including consensus), New Zealand was the only PIF country not to have their leader attend the 2021 leaders' online meeting

(instead the Foreign Minister dialled in). This was a momentous meeting where the next PIF Secretary-General position was voted on – famously Micronesian states did not get their choice of candidate that had been agreed upon in a 'gentlemen's agreement' and subsequently threatened to leave the PIF (Kiribati did leave, for one year). New Zealand was accused by Palau of voting against the gentlemen's agreement, although their vote was never confirmed (Howes and Sen 2021). New Zealand then acted to encourage PIF unity, including sending the Prime Minister, Foreign Minister, and Associate Foreign Minister to the 2022 PIF Leader's meeting in a demonstration of commitment.

At the time, Aupito William Sio (born in Samoa) was the Associate Minister for Foreign Affairs with a focus on the Pacific. Simultaneously, the Minister for Pacific Peoples (focused domestically), Aupito connected domestic Pasifika views with New Zealand's Pacific-facing foreign policy. Most notably, Sio led the work on the Government's formal apology to Pacific peoples for the Dawn Raids – discriminatory raids and deportations that disproportionately targeted Pasifika peoples and households in the 1970s and 1980s, which Auptio had been subject to himself. Instead of just a speech, the apology event was conducted as a Samoan ifoga (formal ceremonial apology), where Ardern sat under fine mats seeking forgiveness for the government's actions, until it was lifted by the wronged party. Auptio acknowledged there were 'risks with a Head of State performing a custom from another culture, and… didn't want to offend other Heads of State who might wonder why a New Zealand prime minister was participating in the ifoga' but that his role was 'to make sure he was protecting the mana and dignity of the prime minister, while also making sure the ceremony was genuine and authentic to the Samoan people' (RNZ, 2023a). With Pacific peoples in the audience, Ardern first greeted them in 11 Pacific languages and then made longer remarks in te reo Māori, Tongan, Samoan, and English, including the statement 'Ou te tula'i atu fua o a'u o 'Ae' ('I stand before you as a representative of those that did you harm' in Samoan) (Ardern 2021). Her apology was not merely words, but included appropriate 'gestures to accompany the apology', including an official historical account of the Dawn Raids and teaching resources about the era for schools; the Teu le Va – Dawn Raids History Community Fund; and additional scholarships to Pacific communities in New Zealand as well as for young leaders from Samoa, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Fiji. The apology was seen as a representation of New Zealand's understanding that the va (relationship) needed to be repaired (teu le va) with Pacific peoples, and deploying statecraft in a way that 'honour[ed] Pacific ways of seeking reconciliation' (Ardern 2021; Koro et al. 2023).

While relations with Pacific people buoyed during this time, there were fewer ministerial visits due to the COVID-19 pandemic – New Zealand did not reopen its borders until March 2022, and for countries like Samoa and Tonga, it was not until August 2022.[5] This led to domestic (and quiet international) criticism of the Prime Minister and Foreign Minister for not being

on the ground in the region, particularly in the wake of a Chinese attempt at a regional security pact. The Defence Minister and Foreign Minister made their first official visits to the region to Fiji in March 2022, although it was not until August 2022 when Ardern led a parliamentary and community delegation to Apia, and then visited Fiji. Following the criticism, Mahuta visited Niue, Tonga, and PNG later in 2023. In early 2023, Ardern stepped down, replaced by Chris Hipkins who appointed Carmel Sepuloni as Deputy Prime Minister – the first Pasifika person (of Tongan and Samoan descent) in that role. She led a delegation in April 2023 with the Minister for Pacific Peoples Barbara Edmonds (also of Samoan descent) and Climate Change Minister James Shaw, as well as representatives of iwi, community, youth, and business leaders, to Fiji, Tonga, and Solomon Islands, and later travelled to Samoa in May 2023 for Samoa's independence celebrations. Sepuloni (2023) continued New Zealand's strategic narrative throughout her visits, stating that 'Aotearoa New Zealand is in and of the Pacific. What happens within the Pacific region impacts New Zealanders here at home'. New Prime Minister Chris Hipkins travelled to PNG in May 2023 for the US-Pacific Summit: his first visit to the region.

The increased intensity of travel was stimulated by the China pact with Solomon Islands and the regional tour by Wang Yi. While the Pacific Resilience approach was intentionally Pacific-centric and encouraged soft power approaches to statecraft, there is no doubt that New Zealand was becoming concerned about Chinese influence in the region. The secretive security pact 'caused consternation' in Wellington (Smith and Holster 2023, p. 1584), after which ministers made announcements about the continuation of New Zealand's military and policing presence in the Solomon Islands, and made comments about sending the 'right signals' (Henare quoted in Neas 2022). Then-Solomon Islands Prime Minister Sogavare responded by saying that New Zealand remained a security partner but that 'to achieve our security needs, it is clear we need to diversify the country's relationship with other partners. What is wrong with that?' (quoted in Neas 2022). In mid-2023, New Zealand signed a security agreement with Fiji to strengthen military training and maritime security, amongst other partners signing a swathe of agreements with Pacific states (Sachdeva 2024).

New Zealand has always had a slightly different relationship with China than Australia has. This is predicated upon a long history of Chinese workers in New Zealand since the gold mining period, continuing to China's recent economic growth where New Zealand was involved with a series of 'firsts' for China – the first developed country to have a bilateral market access agreement with Hina, the first to recognise China as a market economy, and the first to enter into Free Trade negotiations with China, and entered into the 2020 Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (Smith and Holster 2023). New Zealand simultaneously recognises the security concerns relating to China, particularly around cybersecurity, intellectual property, and more recently, China's 'growing assertiveness in the Pacific' (Smith and Holster 2023, p. 1584). New Zealand has tried to balance the economic and security aspects

of the relationship – as outlined in Mahuta's 'The Dragon and the Taniwha' speech, where she invoked Te Moana-nui-a-Kiwa (the Blue Pacific Continent) (Mahuta 2021c). While suggesting a warm relationship with Chinese State Counsellor (Foreign Minister) Wang Yi, she made some clear statements to Chinese representatives about their role in the Pacific:

> '*We will look for ways to work closely with all partners committed to the long term resilience of the Pacific. Regional stability and multilateralism will have a stronger more enduring impact than bilateral arrangements which could lead to variable outcomes.*
>
> *China can play a role in the long term economic recovery of the region but there is a substantial difference between financing loans and contributing to greater ODA investment in particular to the Pacific. We must move towards a more sustainable Pacific that respects Pacific sovereignties, and builds on Pacific peoples' own capabilities, towards long-term resilience'.*
>
> (Mahuta 2021c)

While these statements were 'tempered' compared to American or even Australian discourse about Chinese influence in the Pacific, New Zealand is very aware of the widespread Pacific perspective that China is a legitimate development partner (Wallis and Powles 2021, p. 1061).

However, New Zealand joined the controversial Partners to the Blue Pacific (PBP) in 2022, a clear signal of its concerns and the willingness to engage in strategic denial with Western partners against Chinese influence in the Pacific. There was Pacific criticism of New Zealand for joining this grouping as it is 'underscoring their somewhat schizophrenic relationship' with the PIF – as both a member and now a partner to it (Naupa and Newton Cain 2024; McNeill et al. 2023). In 2023, Mahuta gave a speech which highlighted both Australia and New Zealand as 'committed to partnering with Pacific countries to support them in addressing the real challenges they face that are economic, environmental, social and political', but noted that 'and departure' from Pacific regionalism 'has heightened vigilance amongst Pacific partners' (Mahuta 2023). She was also keen to show New Zealand's contribution to Pacific-led groupings such as the High Ambition Coalition on climate change, the High Seas Treaty, and Vanuatu's request for an advisory opinion from the International Court of Justice (Mahuta 2023).

During this period, New Zealand's approach to statecraft had many changes: from limited in-person high-level engagement due to the COVID-19 pandemic to an increased intensity of engagement; from a very quiet concern about Chinese influence in the region towards actively working with western partners to combat Chinese influence. However, the focus on listening to the Pacific and adapting policy accordingly, mitigating against and adapting to climate change including on the world stage, and continued targeted support to Pacific governments through technical advisors – remained stable.

Resetting the Pacific Reset

In late 2023, New Zealand held another election that flipped the government's domestic approach and electing Prime Minister Christopher Luxon although the Foreign Minister (and Deputy Prime Minister) position returned to Winston Peters, who had driven the 2018 Pacific Reset.[6] While also a Māori Foreign Minister, Peters 'downplayed his whakapapa Māori (Māori genealogy) in his political career (particularly in the later years)' and did not follow the same Indigenous foreign policy model that Mahuta had spearheaded. Unsurprisingly, not long after the 2023 election, Peters articulated his intention to resume the Pacific Reset 'with greater intensity' (quoted in RNZ 2023b).

Peters has continued the strategic narrative of New Zealand's geographical connection to the 'Blue Continent' (Peters 2024b). He also indicated that he 'had done his best to treat all countries equally, regardless of their size' as it reduces 'resentment', and is more likely to lead to successful statecraft outcomes: 'There have been times in the past where we have talked down to them regrettably, but that's not been a mistake that I have made and I think that [treating them equally] is counting and helping in our re-engagement' (quoted in RNZ 2023b). To this end, there has been a real focus in the rhetoric on decision-making through the PIF and strengthening regionalism.

Peters is said to have a good relationship with other leaders in the Pacific Islands region: 'His Māori whakapapa certainly helps, as does his age and gender. But beyond that, during his two previous tenures as foreign minister, Peters didn't take his relationships with Pacific leaders for granted, and the region hasn't forgotten' (de Jong quoted in Fuatai 2024).[7] In his first official visit, Peters travelled to Suva in December 2023 to meet with Fijian Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka, Tuvaluan Prime Minister Kausea Natano, and PIF Secretary-General Henry Puna. Only two months later, he travelled to the Cook Islands, Tonga, and Samoa with the Minister for Pacific Peoples. He also led a parliamentary delegation to PNG, Vanuatu, and Tuvalu (although he cancelled his visit to New Caledonia amid the violent protests) in May 2024. Peters understands the importance of, and thus prioritises, in-person diplomacy as a form of statecraft. Prime Minister Christopher Luxon undertook his first trip to the region in June 2024, to Niue and Fiji, and stopped over in PNG briefly meeting with the Prime Minister en route to Asia.

However, there was concern that Peters' visits were actually to 'canvas Pacific opinion about New Zealand's potential involvement in AUKUS' (Fuatai 2024). The new government has shown a concerted interest in joining Pillar II of the AUKUS agreement – this is the non-nuclear aspect of the partnerships, instead referring to partnership on cyber, drones, quantum computing, undersea cables, hypersonic cables, and artificial intelligence (Pennington 2024). This is a significant departure for New Zealand and its long-standing anti-nuclear stance – but in line with New Zealand's increasingly Western-allied approach to geopolitical competition. While there was mostly silence from Pacific leaders about New Zealand's consideration of a partnership they

have largely opposed (see Koro et al. 2023; Louey 2024; McNeill et al. 2023), silence should not be taken to mean acquiescence, instead more likely an expression of disagreement within the Pacific Way (Taylor et al. 2023). Samoan Prime Minister Fiamē Naomi Mata'afa took the opportunity while signing to state that 'we don't want the Pacific to be seen as an area that people will take licence in terms of nuclear arrangements' – obviously in relation to the prospect of New Zealand joining AUKUS (Pennington 2024).

New Zealand's consideration of AUKUS is tied to increasing cooperation with Western partners to contain China's influence globally, and in particular, in the Pacific. Peters is much more outspoken on China in the Pacific than Mahuta, although still tempers his comments. In PNG, he simply said that 'It is crucial, given current geostrategic challenges, that our two countries work more closely together' (Peters 2024a); and in May 2024 argued in his first major foreign policy speech that 'The Pacific region's strategic environment is not benign, far from it. Remorseless pressure is being exerted across it as beachheads are sought and influence peddled' (Peters 2024b). In response to domestic media questioning about China, he said that 'it was important that any country engaging with the Pacific respected and understood their core values of governance' and reiterated that New Zealand and China had worked together in the Pacific previously (most notably on the trilateral water project in Cook Islands, which had many challenges) (Zhang 2020; RNZ 2023b).

Within Peters' series of meetings with Pacific leaders, he has been renewing statements of partnership, which include security aspects (Pennington 2024). However, as security pacts appear to proliferate around the Pacific by other partners, the countries that have the closest ties with New Zealand have sought to take advantage of the increased interest in the region. Through free association, New Zealand has an obligation to assist with Cook Islands' defence and security if asked; however, in February 2024 Cook Islands proposed a trilateral security pact with Australia and New Zealand (Sachdeva 2024). While this does not necessarily signal dissatisfaction with New Zealand's security and defence statecraft, it does demonstrate how Pacific Island states are deploying their own tools of statecraft in the geopolitical competition (Chapter 2). Peters was tentative about the idea, although it is unclear at the time of writing if such an agreement will forge ahead.

Despite the large-scale job losses under the Luxon government, Peters suggested that New Zealand's diplomatic footprint needs to grow, and he has supported the need for aid to the Blue Pacific Continent for the sake of both development and New Zealand's national security (Blades 2024). Indeed, in early 2024, New Zealand appointed its first diplomat of Samoan heritage to the role of High Commissioner in Samoa (RNZ 2024).[8] However, there is less support for Pasifika populations in New Zealand than under the previous government – with campaigning before the election including the now-co-Deputy Prime Minister making inappropriate 'jokes' about blowing up the Ministry for Pacific Peoples (Trafford 2023). This indicates that there will be less use of people-to-people links with the diaspora in this government's

deployment of statecraft especially when David Seymour takes a leading role in the second half of Luzon's term.

Conclusion

New Zealand has a long-standing positive relationship with the region, highlighted by its strategic narrative of being both in, and of, the Pacific Islands due to the geography and large Pasifika population. New Zealand has seen significant shifts in its Pacific-facing foreign policy, which affected how it deployed statecraft in the Pacific Islands – borne by different governments and foreign ministers. Long-standing Pacific migration, technical assistance, and scholarship programmes continued across governments as important aspects of statecraft. The COVID-19 pandemic affected in-person high-level meetings for a while, and there were some concerns about regionalism, with the reopening of borders and increased concern about Chinese influence in the Pacific, high-level meetings in the Pacific have become more frequent, and appear to have reinvigorated New Zealand's relationship with the Pacific Islands region.

Notes

1 Cook Islands and Niue are sovereign states in free association with New Zealand, which by virtue gives them New Zealand citizenship. Cook Islands gained independence in 1965, and Niue in 1974.
2 Tokelau is a non-self-governing territory administered by New Zealand
3 30 New Zealand Government agencies were involved in implementing the Pacific Reset, including increased involvement by technical and policy advisors, trainers, and senior officials.
4 The "Pacific Way" is a 'set of ideas, visions, and processes that are dynamic, reinventing itself under new contexts while simultaneously grounded to core values' around mutual respect, inclusivity, consensus, flexibility, and providing space for compromise – often used in relation to the PIF (Kabutaulaka 2021).
5 However, there was still in-person interaction at the advisor level: New Zealand sent technical and medical advisors to assist with Cook Islands' and Niue's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the re-opening of their borders.
6 Because a government had not yet been formed at the time of the November 2023 PIF in Cook Islands, New Zealand's delegation was bi-partisan, although was unable to make promises or funding announcements.
7 Peters has now been Foreign Minister under three non-consecutive governments: 2005-2008; 2017-2020; 2023-present.
8 Although not the first New Zealand head of mission with Pacific, or Samoan heritage.

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10 Asia in the Pacific

India, Indonesia, Japan, and Korea's statecraft in the Pacific Islands

Joanne Wallis, Chloe Le, and Alexander Jun-Li Yeong

Introduction

A range of partner states from Asia have developed their engagement with the Pacific Islands region over the last five years. This chapter focuses on four of the most prominent: Japan, South Korea, India, and Indonesia. Japan, South Korea, and India held bilateral summits with Pacific leaders in 2023, while Indonesia held the Indonesia Pacific Forum for Development in 2022 and has longstanding relationships in the region, particularly by virtue of its associate membership of the Melanesian Spearhead Group. This chapter begins by analysing the strategic interests motivating these Asian partner states to enhance their focus on the region, before outlining what tools of statecraft they are deploying, and how they are cooperating (or not) with others. It concludes by arguing that while Japan, South Korea, India, and Indonesia each have unique reasons for their interest in the region, they are primarily motivated by their interests in their differing conceptions of the broader Indo-Pacific strategic region.

Japan

Why is Japan interested in the Pacific Islands region?

Japan has long had a strategic interest in the Pacific Islands region, particularly in the sub-region of Micronesia, which lies across vital air and sea lanes of communication. Accordingly, after the First World War, Japan sought the South Seas Mandate over most of the Micronesian sub-region (contemporary Palau, the Federated States of Micronesia, the Republic of Marshall Islands (RMI), and the Commonwealth of Northern Mariana Islands (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, n.d.)) from the League of Nations in 1919 (Lawson 2016, p. 2). In addition to advancing its strategic interests, the rich fisheries of the region were attractive to Japan, and large Japanese settlements were established to exploit them (Tarte 2002).

After Japan lost these territories following the Second World War, it began to establish diplomatic relations with newly independent Pacific Island

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countries (PICs), starting with Samoa regaining independence in 1962 (Aldrich 2018). Japan was primarily motivated by its interest in their marine resources. As more PICs regained their independence, Japan's relations in the region grew, and it became a major distant water fishing nation during the 1970s and 1980s (Tarte 2002).

Echoing the United States (US) and Australia's concerns about strategic competition discussed in Chapters 7 and 8, since 2007 Japan has sought to promote its vision of a 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' (FOIP). This concept was initiated by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in 2007, when he delivered a speech emphasising the 'Confluence of Two Seas' and urged Japan and its allies and partners to seek an 'open and transparent… network [that] will allow people, goods, capital, and knowledge to flow freely' from the Indian Ocean to the Pacific Ocean (Abe 2007). Reflecting Japan's disputes with China over maritime territory in the East China Sea, its FOIP policy emphasises international order and the rule of law, particularly the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, which establishes the legal regime that regulates maritime territorial claims (Envall 2020).

Japan has advanced its FOIP vision with its partners, particularly the US and Australia, with some success (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2023). In 2023, Japan renewed its FOIP vision, and in the context of rising strategic competition, it emphasised the importance of cooperation through dialogue, equal partnerships among nations, and a 'people' focused approach, underpinned by a rules-based order, tackling non-traditional security challenges, enhancing relationships and infrastructure in partner states, and enhancing maritime and airspace security. In this renewed statement of its FOIP vision, the Japanese government made only minimal reference to the Pacific Island region. This highlights that, while Japan sees the region as part of the wider Indo-Pacific, for Japan the Pacific Islands region is not a priority area compared to more contested and strategically important East and South China Seas or Indian Ocean. Therefore, as in the case of a similarly trade-dependent nation, South Korea, Japan's interests in the Pacific Islands region echo its general interests in promoting the key elements of its FOIP vision: the rule of law, freedom of navigation, and free trade.

Japan's statecraft in the Pacific Islands region

Since the 1970s, Japan's approach to the region has primarily been developmental, with its most important statecraft tools being aid, loans, and other assistance packages (Envall 2020). In 1985, then-Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone visited Fiji and Papua New Guinea (PNG). In 1987, then-Foreign Minister Tadashi Kuranari announced Japan's policy towards the Pacific Islands region, the 'Kuranari Doctrine'. This doctrine was based on five principles: '(1) respect for independence and self-help, (2) support for regional cooperation, (3) securing political stability, (4) promoting economic cooperation for development, and (5) fostering people-to-people exchanges' (Segawa 2023).

Japan's assistance to the region has been facilitated by its multilateral diplomacy. Japan became a PIF Dialogue Partner in 1989, and in 1997 began to host the triennial Pacific Islands Leaders Meetings (PALM) to discuss shared challenges (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan n.d.). Japan uses the PALM meetings to hear PICs' perspectives and to identify their priorities, which has led it to fund projects in areas such as economic growth, sustainable development, good governance, security, and people-to-people exchange, largely facilitated by the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and its well-regarded volunteer programme. Japan is also an important trading partner for most PICs, with its two-way trade with the region sitting only behind that of Australia and China in value.

Since the mid-2000s, the PALMs have expanded beyond development and environmental issues. Notably, the 2006 PALM was held not long after China held its first Minister Meeting of the China-Pacific Island Countries Economic Development and Cooperation Forum in Fiji (China Daily, 2006). At the 2006 PALM, Japan announced a ¥45 billion (US$383.4 million) aid package for the region over the following three years, and gradually increased the packages announced at the PALMs that followed (Envall 2020). By the time of the 2018 PALM, Japan's agenda was explicitly strategic, with the agenda focused on its FOIP priorities of maritime order and the rule of law, alongside longstanding issues such as sustainable development and ocean sustainability (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2018). But a perception that Japan was foisting its FOIP agenda on the Pacific Islands region was criticised, with commentators claiming that Japan had a 'propensity for informing the PICs of policies impacting or involving them, rather than co-creating such policies' (Funaki and Sato 2019).

Clumsy diplomacy has also dogged Japan's decision to discharge treated nuclear wastewater generated from the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant that was destroyed by a tsunami in 2011. As noted in Chapter 8 with respect to the region's response to Australia's development of nuclear-powered submarines, many PICs are highly sensitive about nuclear waste given that they continue to battle the legacy of nuclear testing in the region. Indeed, in September 2023, PIF foreign ministers released a statement expressing their concern about Japan's decision to begin discharging the water, citing the 1986 South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty (PIF 2023b).

Such diplomatic missteps are surprising given that Japan has a relatively large diplomatic footprint in the Pacific Islands region, with embassies in 11 PICs. Japan has also provided capacity building and technical training across the region for decades, as well as infrastructure projects, and has therefore deployed large numbers of officials to the region. In 2021, Japan announced its 'Pacific Bond' policy at the triennial PALM meeting, intended to reinforce cooperation between Japan and the region (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2021). And it has employed soft power tools of statecraft, including people-to-people exchanges through the Pacific LEADS program, cultural initiatives (such as Judo lessons and uniforms at PALM 7) (Ministry of Foreign Affairs

of Japan n.d.), and promoted friendly relations through the exchange of ideas at capacity development trainings and seminars. Japan also offers a series of scholarship programs (Segawa 2023).

Japan has also deployed security tools of statecraft, including donating small patrol and rescue boats to Fiji to increase maritime security under its Official Security Framework (The Japan News 2023), which is designed to facilitate cooperation between Japan and partner countries (CSIS, 2023). Japan's Ministry of Defense (JMOD) has established the Japan-Pacific Islands Defense Dialogue (JPIDD), held capacity-building programs with the PNG Defence Force, and promoted Japanese Self-Defense Force port calls and aircraft visits to PICs (Ministry of Defense of Japan 2021a). Japan has also been cooperating with Australia, Canada, France, the United Kingdom (UK), the US, and the PIF's defence ministers in the JPIDD to build confidence and address traditional and non-traditional security challenges within the region.

Japan has also increasingly sought to work with its ally, the US, and other partners in the region. For example, Japan is working with the US, Australia, and New Zealand on the PNG Electrification Partnership announced at the 2018 APEC meeting, with the aim of electrifying 70 percent of PNG by 2030. Since 2018, Japan has also cooperated with the US and Australia under the Trilateral Infrastructure Partnership for Infrastructure Investment in the Indo-Pacific (DFAT 2018; 2022b), which serves as a counter to China's infrastructure investment under its Belt and Road Initiative. At the 2018 Japan-US Summit Meeting, Japan and the US announced their intention to cooperate on energy, infrastructure, and digital connectivity in the region (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2019). As Australia and New Zealand attend PALMs (as PIF members), this has facilitated cooperation between the three partners, including on natural resource conservation, education, health, and economic security (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan n.d.). And, in 2022, Japan was a founding member of the Partners in the Blue Pacific initiative, intended to facilitate cooperation between Japan, the US, Australia, New Zealand, the UK, South Korea, Germany, and Canada in the Pacific Islands region (DFAT, 2022a).

In 2023, Japan's cooperation with partners became explicitly strategic. It has signed Reciprocal Access Agreements with Australia and France to facilitate defence cooperation, including joint military exercises, and a Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation with Australia in 2022. In 2023 the Indian Navy and Japanese Navy (JMSDF) conducted bilateral exercises to the south of Kyushu Island in Japan (Ministry of Defense of Japan 2023). JICA and the Export-Import Bank of Korea-Economic Development Cooperation Fund (KEXIM-EDCF) have signed a Memorandum of Cooperation to further collaborate in the Indo-Pacific region (The Japan Times 2023). In 2021, the British defence minister was included in the JPIDD meeting to discuss security challenges such as infectious diseases, the law of the sea, combating illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing, and strengthening law enforcement in the Pacific Islands region (Ministry of Defense of Japan 2021b).

South Korea

Why is South Korea interested in the Pacific Islands region?

South Korea has maintained friendly, but not particularly deep, relationships with PICs since their independence in the 1960s. South Korea's primary interest was in the abundant fish stocks, particularly tuna and swordfish, and natural resources in PICs exclusive economic zones. As South Korea's economy grew and it emerged as a more active middle power in the 1970s, it began to expand its diplomatic relationships. Most significantly, following South Korea's transition to democracy, it became a dialogue partner of the PIF in 1997. It has held foreign minister-level meetings with Pacific officials every three years since 2011, encouraged by the 'Global Korea' policy pursued by the Lee Myung-bak government between 2008 and 2013, which emphasised regional multilateralism and global diplomacy, with a particular emphasis on non-traditional security.

As strategic competition between China, on the one hand, and the US and its allies (including South Korea) and partners, on the other, deepens, South Korea has faced the challenge of balancing its relationships with the two major powers. South Korea's vulnerabilities have been highlighted by incidents such as China's reaction to the deployment of the US's Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) Missile defence system in South Korea in 2017. In response, China imposed trade restrictions on South Korean entertainment, consumer products, and tourism. Following the incident, the Moon Jae-in government (2017–2022) introduced the New Southern Policy (NSP) to diversify relationships, particularly with India and ASEAN states, alongside the US and China. Under the NSP+, cooperation with the US aimed to strengthen ties and support PICs in law enforcement, infrastructure, energy security, resource management, and internet connectivity.

The Yoon government, which has been in office since 2022, has continued to take a more active approach to responding to strategic competition. In 2022, it adopted a 'Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region', which aims to diversify South Korea's international relationships (including in the Pacific Islands region), maintain a rules-based global order, and assist allies under the principle of reciprocity in areas such as science, technology, climate change, and energy security (Government of the Republic of Korea 2022). South Korea views maintenance of the rules-based global order as critical to its security, as trade constitutes 85% of its GDP (Government of the Republic of Korea 2022), and, like Japan, it relies on rules such as the law of the sea to protect its imports of key resources such as food, natural gas, and crude oil.

South Korea's statecraft in the Pacific Islands region

South Korea's interest in bolstering its statecraft in the Pacific Islands region was signalled in 2022 when it joined the US, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, and the UK as a member of the Partners in the Blue Pacific initiative discussed

in Chapters 7 and 8. Its statecraft was further elevated in 2023 when it hosted the first leader-level Korea-Pacific Islands Summit, which was attended by President Yoon Suk-Yeol and heads of state (or senior ministers) from all PIF member countries (except FSM, which had been hit by a typhoon).[1] This built on the three-yearly foreign ministers' meetings that had been held between South Korea and PICs since 1997. The summit focused on issues of mutual concern, particularly climate change, tourism, improving energy, and food security, expanding South Korean trade and investment in fisheries, and resource management. It culminated in a '2023 Korea-PIF Leaders Declaration' and a 'Korea-Pacific Islands Action Plan' (President of the Republic of Korea 2023).

At its 2023 summit, South Korea announced that it will increase its aid as a tool of statecraft, providing US$40 million by 2027, as well as concessional loans for projects including a port in PNG and green energy projects in Fiji, the RMI, and Solomon Islands. South Korea will also support improved ICT connectivity. Since 2008, South Korea has also supported the ROK-PIF Cooperation Fund with US$1.5 million per year, and the Economic Development Cooperation Fund, which provides loans for infrastructure development. Between 2008 and 2021, South Korea also provided bilateral development assistance, primarily to Fiji (approx. USD$46.5 million), Solomon Islands (approx. USD$22.17 million), PNG (approx. USD$15.63 million), Kiribati (approx. USD$10.672 million), and Samoa (approx. USD$6.183 million) (Lowy Institute 2024). In 2023, JICA and the Export-Import Bank of Korea, Economic Development Cooperation Fund signed a Memorandum of Cooperation to further collaborate in the Indo-Pacific region (JICA 2023). South Korea also announced that it would expand its security tools of statecraft to include initiatives aimed at strengthening the maritime security capability of PICs – this is a priority for PICs that have resource-rich maritime territories and has flow-on benefits of improved maritime domain awareness for South Korea and its allies and partners.

Guided by its Indo-Pacific strategy, much of South Korea's statecraft in the region has been conducted in cooperation with allies and partners. South Korea has cooperated with the US to improve weather detection, climate change response, healthcare, and surveillance for IUU fishing. In 2021, under the NSP and the US Indo-Pacific strategy, the two countries collaborated on issues relating to security, climate change, digital infrastructure, human security, and COVID-19 (U.S. Department of State 2019). In 2023, they funded US$86 million of projects for green energy, improving infrastructure, health security, and marine resource management (Korea International Cooperation Agency 2023).

In 2023, Australia and South Korea held the first Australia-ROK Defence Ministers' Meeting, and in 2024 they signed an MOU to improve maritime security within the Indo-Pacific region and participate in military exercises (Marles et al. 2024). South Korea has also participated in military exercises in the region with France, including their first joint exercise in July 2023 as part of Pegase 2023 (Milhiet 2023). South Korea's relationship with the UK has

also deepened, as enumerated in the November 2023 'Downing Street Accord' (UK Government 2023). The accord provided for collaboration between the South Korea and UK in technology, science, defence, trade, energy, and maritime security in the Indo-Pacific, with converging views on international challenges, including in the Pacific Islands region (UK Government 2023).

India

Why is India interested in the Pacific Islands region?

Like South Korea, India's interest in the Pacific Islands region is relatively nascent. Until the early 2000s, India's foreign and security policy was primarily interested in the Indian Ocean region and Southeast Asia. India's main connections in the Pacific Islands region were to the Indian-Fijian community, many of whom are the descendants of indentured labourers brought to Fiji during the British colonial period; and with PICs as fellow members of the Commonwealth, Non-Aligned Movement, and the United Nations. Consequently, India only maintained embassies in Fiji and PNG. However, in 2006, India became a Dialogue partner of the PIF, signalling a growing interest in the region.

Since Prime Minister Narendra Modi took office in 2014, India has sought to develop its diplomatic, military, and economic reach to its 'extended neighbourhood' into the broader Indo-Pacific via its 'Look East' (Saha 2020), and later, 'Act East' policy (Deshpande 2024). This has seen India reach out to the Indo-Pacific, including the Pacific Islands region, through trade, investment, infrastructure, and security tools of statecraft (Panda 2019; Pradhan 2023).

Yet while Japan and South Korea's Indo-Pacific strategic policies include a focus on closer alignment with the US in the context of growing strategic competition with China, India has been less willing to link itself too closely to either strategic competitor. However, India is a member of the 'Quad' strategic partnership with the US, Japan, and Australia and has expanded its military exercises in the Indo-Pacific region, particularly Exercise Malabar, which started as a joint US–India exercise in 1992, but was temporarily expanded to include Australia, Japan, and Singapore in 2007; Japan became a permanent member in 2015, and Australia joined in 2020. But India has not neatly aligned its foreign and strategic policy with its fellow Quad-member states. Like Japan and South Korea, India emphasises that it takes an 'inclusive' approach to the Indo-Pacific, in contrast to the US and Australia's more explicit attempts to contain China. India identifies its primary interests as being the rule of law, navigational freedoms and overflight, equal access to the commons, and dispute resolution through dialogue (Chinoy 2020).

India's interests in the Pacific Islands region have reflected these broader and foreign and strategic foreign policy priorities, with an emphasis on advancing its economic interests and on countering perceived Chinese influence (Seth and Shivangi 2023). It is also increasingly interested in seabed minerals found in the massive exclusive economic zones of PICs.

India's statecraft in the Pacific Islands region

Reflecting the growing activism of India's foreign and strategic policy since Modi took office in 2014, India has engaged in more concerted diplomatic statecraft in the Pacific Islands region. Most significantly, the first Forum for India-Pacific Islands Cooperation was held in Fiji in 2014 with 14 PICs (Pandey 2023). India convened a second Forum in India in 2015, and a third in PNG in 2023. Modi travelled to the region for both the 2014 and 2023 Forums. India also convened the India-Pacific Islands Sustainable Development Conference in Fiji in 2017 (Pacific Islands Development Forum 2017), and Modi convened an India-Pacific Island Small Island Developing States (PSIDS) meeting on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly in 2019.

India did not invite Australia or New Zealand to its three Forums, despite them being PIF member states (in contrast, Japan and Korea did invite them to their respective meetings). It also did not invite the French territories of New Caledonia or French Caledonia, despite them also being PIF members. This reflected India's strategic narrative that positions it as a leader of the decolonised Global South.[2] Indeed, when Modi arrived in PNG in 2023, Papua New Guinean Prime Minister James Marape referred to the two countries' 'shared… history of being colonised by colonial masters' (Dziedzic 2023). Marape then welcomed Modi as 'the leader of the global south' and asked him 'to offer a third big voice in the face of the global north', saying that PICs 'will rally behind your leadership at global forums'. These sentiments picked up on ideas discussed at the Voice of Global South Summit of developing countries that India had convened in January 2023 (The Times of India, 2023). They also highlighted that, as a fellow formerly colonised and developing country, India brings a unique perspective to its engagement in the region that may be appreciated by Pacific leaders.

Marape's comments also echoed language used around the creation of the Non-Aligned Movement (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, n.d.). During the Cold War, India, PNG, and other – primarily developing and decolonised – countries, recognised the benefits of not formally aligning with either of the superpowers. Similar dynamics are evident today. Even without formal alignment, a country can enter into issue-based partnerships to fulfil its foreign policy goals and ambitions, or its economic development and infrastructure targets. This reflects India's current approach – entering into the Quad with like-minded countries, for instance, but keeping its 'strategic autonomy' intact.

But India's decision to engage with PICs without Australia, its Quad partner, highlights a challenge to India's diplomacy in the Pacific Islands region. If India does seek to work more closely with its Quad and other partners in the region, it will need to reconcile this with its perceived role as a leader of the global south. Marape's comments indicate that at least one Pacific leader welcomes India's presence as a potential counterbalance to the increasingly

polarised strategic competition. Yet India's credentials as a leader of the global south with a proud history of anti-colonialism seemed to be undermined by its exclusion of New Caledonia and French Polynesia-both of which have active independence movements – from the 2023 summit on the grounds that it was 'limited to independent and sovereign nations' (Islands Business 2023).

The first Forum for India-Pacific Islands Cooperation involved several announcements relating to economic tools of statecraft, including establishing a Pacific Islands trade office in India and providing visas on arrival for the citizens of the 14 PICs in attendance. At the second Forum, India announced that it was establishing a Business Accelerator for Forum for India-Pacific Islands cooperation (FICCI-FIPIC 2015). In 2016, India and PNG agreed to a Bilateral Investment Promotion and Protection Agreement to build a consensus for greater investment in certain sectors such as security, defence, health, education, and business. India and PNG also signed the Memorandum of Understanding for Agriculture Research Cooperation between the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) and the University of Technology, Lae, PNG, in 2016 (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India 2016). Facilitated by these mechanisms, between 2015 and 2023, India trained almost 1000 PNG officials and sent its own advisers to the region to assist PICs (Saint-Mézard 2023). At the third Forum in 2023, Modi announced 12 development initiatives for PICs, which focused on issues such as healthcare, renewable energy, and cybersecurity, as well as 1000 technology-focused scholarships for Pacific students over the following five years (Press Information Bureau, India, 2023). But the implementation of India's policy announcements has been patchy, and India has only a small economic footprint in the region. For example, between 2008 and 2021 India provided only US$98.23 million in assistance (Lowy Institute 2024). However, India has provided limited humanitarian and disaster relief aid, including in response to cyclones in Fiji, PNG, Tonga, and Vanuatu, and assistance with disaster warning and preparations (Saint-Mézard 2023).

Indonesia

Why is Indonesia interested in the Pacific Islands region?

Indonesia differs from Japan, South Korea, and India because it is much more geographically proximate and indeed presents itself as having a 'dual identity' as a member of Southeast Asia, particularly ASEAN, and as part of the Pacific Islands region by virtue of five provinces which it characterises as Melanesian (Papua, West Papua, Maluku, North Maluku, and East Nusa Tenggara) (Wardhani 2023). For example, in 2019, the Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi claimed that 'Indonesians and the people in countries of the South Pacific belong to one family' (Marsudi 2019). Traditionally, Indonesia's main interest in the Pacific Islands region has been to counter support for the self-determination aspirations of its provinces of Papua and West Papua (Waqavakatoga 2022). These provinces were formally

incorporated into Indonesia following a United Nations-administered 'Act of Free Choice' in 1969, in which a select group of Papuan leaders were invited to vote – in highly controversial circumstances – on the region's political future (Chauvel 2005). Papuan independence leaders, led by the United Liberation Movement for West Papua (ULMWP), have consistently raised concerns about the legitimacy of the vote and have maintained their claim for self-determination.

In the context of domestic political liberalisation, the independence of Timor-Leste in 2002, and the challenging recovery from the Asian financial crisis, Indonesia identified that it needed to have more active involvement in its near region. Accordingly, in 2002 it convened the first meeting of the Southwest Pacific Dialogue, consisting of foreign affairs ministers from Indonesia, the Philippines, Australia, New Zealand, and Timor-Leste, but only one PIC: PNG (Santarita 2002).

Since 2018, Indonesia has also had a more overtly geopolitical interest in the Pacific Islands region. Conscious of emerging strategic competition, to encourage ASEAN to engage Indonesia adopted an Indo-Pacific cooperation concept based on the principles of being 'open, transparent and inclusive, promoting the habit of dialogue, promoting cooperation and friendship, and upholding international law' (Parameswaran 2018). ASEAN subsequently adopted an 'Indo-Pacific Outlook' at its 2019 Summit (ASEAN 2019), which, echoing Indonesia, emphasised that the Indo-Pacific concept can be inclusive, with the goal of maintaining a relatively neutral stance in the context of strategic competition between the US and China. This contrasts with the more muscular approaches of external partners such as the US and Australia, which want a 'free' Indo-Pacific, which is frequently interpreted as attempting to exclude and isolate China (Reeves and Wallis 2020). Since 2014, Indonesia's foreign and strategic policy has also been guided by its 'Global Maritime Fulcrum' initiative, which is based on leveraging Indonesia's strategic position as a link between the Pacific and Indian Oceans (Dinarto 2016).

Indonesia's statecraft in the Pacific Islands region

Reflecting its longstanding interest in countering support for the self-determination of its Papua and West Papua provinces, Indonesia has focused on diplomatic statecraft in the Pacific Islands region. This diplomacy has primarily been bilateral – with a particular emphasis on its neighbour PNG (which shares a border with Papua province) and Fiji, which is perceived as a regional leader. It has also pursued multilateral diplomacy, particularly through the PIF, of which it became a dialogue partner in 2001, and the sub-regional Melanesian Spearhead Group, of which it became an observer in 2011 and then an associate member in 2015. Indonesia has used its status to influence the Melanesian Spearhead Group not to admit the ULMWP as a member (RNZ 2021a), even though the Kanak independence movement in the French territory of New Caledonia, the Front de Libération Nationale Kanake et Socialiste (FLNKS), is a full member of the Group.

After Fiji was suspended from the PIF in 2008 following its 2006 coup, Indonesia took advantage of Fiji's hunt for new diplomatic partners, supporting Fiji's efforts to join the Non-Aligned Movement and signing a bilateral development cooperation agreement (Fiji Embassy in Japan, n.d.) and a memorandum of understanding on police cooperation in 2011 (Fiji Police Force 2023).

Vanuatu has been a particularly strong supporter of West Papuan self-determination, adopting legislation in 2010 supporting West Papua's independence (RNZ 2021b). And, as a result of regional public consultations, in 2015 the PIF identified West Papua as a priority thematic area, and PIF leaders requested that the PIF Chair consult with the Indonesian Government about the PIF conducting a 'fact finding mission to discuss the situation in Papua with the parties involved' (PIF 2015). In 2016, several PICs then highlighted apparent human rights abuses in West Papua at the United Nations General Assembly (BenarNews 2022). In 2017, a PIF team observed provincial elections in Papua and West Papua (Takinana 2019).

However, Indonesia has since had some success persuading PICs to mute their criticism. For example, while Solomon Islands was once a vocal supporter of West Papuan self-determination, it softened its stance after sending a delegation to Indonesia in 2018 (RNZ 2018a) in a visit that was criticised by a Solomon Islands civil society group as lacking transparency (RNZ 2018c). After Papua New Guinean Prime Minister Peter O'Neill commented during a 2018 lecture that negotiations relating to West Papua should be taken 'up to the United Nations' (The Fiji Times 2018), Indonesia invited Papua New Guinean foreign minister Rimbink Pato to visit Jakarta, where he reaffirmed PNG's position that Papua and West Papua are 'an integral part of the Republic of Indonesia' (RNZ 2018b). Signalling the effectiveness of Indonesia's efforts to influence PICs, by 2022, only the RMI mentioned Papua and West Papua at the United Nations General Assembly (BenarNews 2022). Solomon Islands academic Tarcisius Kabutaulaka described this as 'a demonstration of Indonesia's growing influence', as 'Jakarta has been quite successful in taking the West Papua issue off the agenda' (BenarNews 2022). PIF leaders then 'reaffirmed recognition of Indonesia's sovereignty over West Papua' at their 2023 meeting. While the leaders also appointed a PIF envoy consisting of the Prime Ministers of Fiji and PNG 'to facilitate a dialogue with Indonesia on areas of shared interest for mutual understanding' (PIF 2023a), little substantive action has been taken. Indonesia has also been able to keep West Papua off the United Nations list of non-self-governing territories, otherwise known as the 'decolonisation list' because countries listed are assumed to have the right to self-determination.

In tandem with its diplomacy relating to West Papua and motivated by its changing geopolitical interests, Indonesia has also deployed tools of statecraft aimed at building its relationships in the Pacific Islands region more broadly. In 2019, Indonesia convened an Indonesia South Pacific Forum 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 2019). In 2021, Indonesia established a Directorate for Pacific and Oceania within its Foreign Ministry, mandated to develop and implement policies relating to the region (DPOA 2021). However, Indonesia's diplomacy has since been limited to bilateral meetings, and it has not attempted to emulate Japan, South Korea, or India by holding a regional leader-level meeting (Wangge and Lawson 2023). However, Indonesian President Joko Widodo did hold a trilateral meeting with the Prime Ministers of PNG James Marape and Fiji Sitiveni Rabuka on the sidelines of the APEC Summit in 2023 (Government of Indonesia 2023), which reflected Indonesia's tendency to see the region through those two PICs.

Indonesia has deployed small-scale economic tools of statecraft in the Pacific Islands region since the 1980s, which increased in value as Indonesia's economy developed (Wangge and Lawson 2023). Indonesia has sought to expand its economic tools of statecraft since it announced its Pacific Elevation policy and created the Indonesian Agency for International Development in 2019. In 2019, Indonesia convened a Pacific Exposition in Auckland, New Zealand, to facilitate business and investment connections between 20 PICs and Indonesia (ExportNZ 2019). In parallel, it held a Pacific Cultural Forum to which it invited PICs, which was an attempt at deploying soft power to try to draw cultural links between it and the region and to emphasise its strategic narrative that it is a Melanesian state (Wardhani 2023). Indonesia has since worked to deepen cooperation with PICs on issues such as development, technical cooperation, and trade (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of The Republic of Indonesia 2020). Accordingly, Indonesia held the first Indonesia-Pacific Forum for Development in December 2022, which was attended by representatives of 13 PICs, Australia, New Zealand, and Timor-Leste, as well as officials from the Melanesian Spearhead Group and the PIF (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia 2020). The forum produced a 'Bali Message for Development Cooperation in the Pacific' which sought to implement Indonesia's Pacific Elevation strategy, with a focus on aid and technical assistance (Asia News Network 2022).

Indonesia has also used its unique status at the intersection of the Southeast Asian and Pacific Islands regions to advance its diplomacy. In early July 2023, Indonesian President Joko Widodo visited PNG and emphasised the importance of greater cooperation between ASEAN and the Pacific Islands region. Almost immediately afterwards, Indonesia hosted the ASEAN ministerial meeting, where it secured agreement from ASEAN members to initiate inter-secretariat cooperation between ASEAN and the PIF, as well as a concept note on that cooperation (AsiaGlobal Online 2023). The prospects of greater cooperation between the two regions offer opportunities for both regions to learn lessons from each other. For example, Southeast Asia could learn much from the Pacific Islands region's effective cooperation to manage its fisheries resources (Aqorau 2019). The Pacific Islands region could learn from how Southeast Asian countries cooperatively manage their strategic partners through the ASEAN Regional Forum (Wallis and Powles 2023).

Conclusion

While Japan, South Korea, India, and Indonesia have each increased their statecraft in the Pacific Islands region over the last decade, they have primarily done so in the context of their broader Indo-Pacific strategies, rather than from an interest in the region itself. In each case, these Asian powers see the region as a site where their emphasis on the importance of the rules-based order, particularly as it relates to the maritime domain, and their more inclusive and less confrontational approach to China, can be promoted. Japan has the longest-standing relationships with PICs, dating back to the colonial era, and has been a major aid donor for several decades. South Korea's relationships are much more nascent, and it remains a relatively minor partner for the region. India's interest in the region differs because of its unique identity as a claimed leader of the Global South, and its reluctance to work with Quad and other partners in the region. And Indonesia has the most complex relationship with PICs, as it (controversially) seeks to claim membership of the region, while simultaneously acting as a leader of the Southeast Asian region. But what all four Asian partner states share is a tendency to see the Pacific Islands region as secondary in their strategic calculations to more pressing geopolitical flashpoints. Consequently, all four share questions about their future attention and commitment to the region, including whether their recent announcements will be implemented. India and Indonesia also face the challenge of engaging the region beyond their two main partners, PNG and Fiji, and establishing broad-based relationships.

Notes

1 This discussion draws on Wallis and Kim (2023).
2 This section draws on Wallis and Saha (2023).

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11 European statecraft in the Pacific Islands

Henrietta McNeill and Nicholas Ross Smith

Introduction

Europe has a long relationship with the Pacific Islands region: every Pacific Island state had some experience with European colonialism, whether it was Spain (Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), Palau and Republic of Marshall Islands (RMI)), the United Kingdom (UK) (Cook Islands, Niue, Tokelau, Kiribati, Tuvalu, Fiji, Solomon Islands, New Guinea, Nauru, Vanuatu), Portugal (Timor-Leste), Netherlands (West Papua), France (Vanuatu), or Germany (Samoa, RMI, FSM, Palau, Nauru, Solomon Islands, Papua). Even Tonga, claimed to be the only state not colonised in the region, sought British protection between 1900–1970. Many of these states saw other occupiers over time (including New Zealand, Japan, Australia, and Indonesia), and most have regained independence since the 1960s. During colonial periods, 'Western countries mapped the region into their sphere of influence and gave themselves the "right" to use the region for their strategic purposes', including nuclear testing and mineral extraction (Kabutaulaka 2021 p. 43). A European colonial dimension continues in the region: New Caledonia, French Polynesia, and Wallis and Futuna remain French *territoires d'outre-mer* (overseas territories), and Pitcairn Island is governed by the UK.

Between widespread Pacific independence, and a rise in internal European issues – Brexit, the Russian invasion of the Ukraine, and numerous financial and social crises (Manfredi-Sánchez and Smith 2023) – a once-strong relationship has waned significantly, and European statecraft efforts have been lacklustre. Buoyed by great power competition, European states and the European Union (EU) have recently re-focussed on the 'Indo-Pacific' and tried to renew their ties to the region in the hopes of being a 'third party' to pacify and mediate potential conflict between the United States (US) and China. PICs are not receptive to the concept of the 'Indo-Pacific', which does not centre (often ignoring) the Pacific Islands region, and was not a label of their choosing (Wallis et al. 2023). Instead, PICs tell European actors that 'they don't want to choose sides in a more and more charged geopolitical environment, and they see [European actors] as supporting them in their own development, in building up their capacities in order to not need to take sides' (Plinkert quoted in Sachdeva 2024).

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Using the web of statecraft set out in Chapter 1 as a heuristic, we analyse how the EU and the two most prominent European states, France and the UK, deploy tools of statecraft in the Pacific Islands region in a contemporary environment. While we focus on the EU, France, and the UK, this is not to say that other European actors are not developing an interest in the region – for example, Germany has recently appointed a Special Envoy to the Pacific Islands, and Canberra-based German political thinktanks have hosted visits of Members of the European Parliament to the Pacific region. European actors have potential leverage in the region, particularly on climate change – the most significant security issue to PICs. However, as other authors in this volume describe, statecraft is not a unilateral action – it must be received by the target state(s). Contradictions in statecraft undermine European efforts, particularly relating to visa-free access, and officious bureaucracy, which, in addition to colonial and nuclear legacies, often mean that PICs and Pacific peoples are often less receptive of European statecraft.

European Union

The EU is naturally an uneasy fit for statecraftiness and has been searching for greater international relevance since the 1970s, taking numerous concrete steps to improve its statecraft competencies (Smith 2016). While the EU considers itself a serious influential international actor, it is often derided as an ineffective international actor that suffers from a 'capabilities-expectations gap' and is prone to 'sleepwalking' on geopolitical issues (Smith 2016).

The Pacific Islands region, despite being distant from and lacking geopolitical or geoeconomic importance for Brussels, still falls within the EU's purview. Historically, the relationship was through the EU's 'Africa, Caribbean, and Pacific' (ACP now the OACPS) framework with former European colonies, under the 1975 Georgetown Agreement (Tavola 2017). While this framework still exists, the region now falls within the EU's wider global geopolitical focus. A major driver has been the emergence of the 'Indo-Pacific' concept as a perceived crucial geopolitical and, especially, geoeconomic area for the EU (van Willigen and Blarel 2024). The EU considers itself an Indo-Pacific power. In 2021, the EU announced its *Indo-Pacific Strategy*, and in conjunction, numerous EU member states – France, Germany, the Netherlands, and, perhaps surprisingly, Latvia, amongst others – have Indo-Pacific strategies.

France is the obvious key European player in the Indo-Pacific (see below on France). After announcing the AUKUS security partnership between Australia, the US, and the UK (and the accompanying fallout from Australia's reneging on a deal to purchase French submarines), French President Emmanuel Macron led a galvanised European response. In late September 2021, Macron stated that 'Europeans must stop being naïve' and that 'when we are under pressure from powers … we need to react and show that we have the power and capacity to defend ourselves. Not escalating things, but

protecting ourselves' (France 24 2021). To this end, France made the Indo-Pacific an external priority area for the French presidency of the Council of the EU (January–June 2022).

Alongside the Indo-Pacific Strategy, the EU announced the launch of the Global Gateway, a €300billion initiative to facilitate links in the digital, energy, transport, health, education, and research sectors globally (European Commission 2021). Through the Global Gateway, the EU announced a 'Green-Blue Alliance for the Pacific' to fund climate action, resilience, and sustainable resource projects in the region. Amongst the first projects announced were the construction of two hydro powerplants in Fiji, and rehabilitation of the Rabaul port in PNG.

The EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy is often criticised for being too focussed on East Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Indian Ocean, which often leaves a sense in the Pacific Islands region that it is forgotten. Due to the 'growing geostrategic competition' the EU noted the need to work more closely with closer partners Australia and New Zealand to ensure 'a stable and peaceful Pacific region' (EEAS 2021). However, whether the EU can demonstrate well-rounded statecraftiness in the Pacific remains open to debate.

Security and Defence

Security and defence are one of seven priority areas listed in the EU's Indo-Pacific strategy, mostly focussed on East Asia. The Pacific Islands region is conspicuous in its absence upon closer inspection, but is, however, present in two of the three "regional outreach" projects listed by the EU: the Global Action on Cybercrime Extended (GLACY+) and the Critical Maritime Routes Indo-Pacific Two (CRIMARIO II). The EU's Ambassador to the Pacific, Barbara Plinkert, recently highlighted cybersecurity as an area where the EU can make an immediate impact in the Pacific (Sachdeva 2024). Nevertheless, it is hard to see any concrete developments in this area beyond rhetoric and intentions, but the fact that this is an area where the Pacific is not ignored (like in other areas) suggests there is perhaps some substance.

Despite this being an area where there is significant potential for cooperation, the only assessment that can be made at this stage is that the EU deploys no credible security and defence statecraft. The EU barely warrants mentioning compared with other security partners in the region, like Australia, New Zealand, or the US. The EU is a civilian-style power, and the Pacific is not seen as a critical region for security and defence in Brussels vis-a-vis other areas of the Indo-Pacific.

Economic statecraft

The EU has significant competency in economic statecraft, as the EU is empowered to make centralised economic policy in international affairs superseding that of its member-states (Smith 2016). The EU is known for using its

international trade advantage for its broader foreign policy objectives. Since the 1975 Lomé Convention (and its successors the 2000 Cotonou Agreement and 2023 Samoa Agreement), the EU has used the carrots of development aid and market access to pursue foreign policy goals in the Pacific (Tavola 2017). The EU ranks as the seventh largest aid donor to the Pacific Islands region during the period of 2008 to 2021, spending USD$1.7b (Lowy Institute 2024).[1] An attitude of throwing cash at the problem without taking the agency of Pacific actors seriously has led to allegations of a neocolonial mindset by Brussels (Serrano 2011). The EU is often criticised as not a genuine development partner due to the 'rigid and complex requirements' for accessing funding, which deters Pacific states and civil society organisations from applying – undermining European economic statecraft attempts (G. Smith et al. 2014).

As the experience of the Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) negotiations shows – in which the PICs were unable to secure advantageous arrangements (Tavola 2017) – the EU has not been as successful in using economic statecraft relative to other areas of the globe. A stumbling block is the perception amongst PICs that the benefits of greater economic interaction with the EU barely surpass the costs of the various strings that are attached – well-known criticisms of EU negotiations (Zimelis 2011).

Although the EU has entered a 'post-Cotonou' era in its dealings with OACPS countries through the Samoa Agreement, the EU's use of economic statecraft in the Pacific still centres on the aforementioned EPA, and the stepping stone 'interim' EPA (iEPA) (Lannon 2023). Importantly, the iEPA is not a Pacific-wide initiative, as only Fiji, PNG, Samoa, and the Solomon Islands are currently involved – despite being open to all Pacific OACPS countries (Tonga and Timor-Leste also expressed interest in participating). Despite Fiji (since 2014), PNG (since 2018), Samoa (since 2018), and Solomon Islands (since 2020) all taking steps to apply the agreement, significant barriers remain to full implementation. The most notable issue is with the fisheries sector: although greater market access to the EU for fish exports brings significant potential economic gains, meeting strict European regulations has posed significant challenges to Fiji and PNG, and the EU's lack of flexibility has often been a source of frustration for exporters.

Despite the litany of issues that accompany the EU's economic statecraft towards the Pacific Islands region, it remains the most tangible and potentially fruitful area of the EU's overall statecraftiness in this region.

Diplomatic statecraft

Diplomatic statecraft has become a key area of the EU's efforts to improve its relationships in the Pacific Islands region. The 2007 Treaty of Lisbon created the European External Action Service to conduct diplomatic relations in a 'state-like' fashion (Smith 2016). The EU first opened a diplomatic presence in the Pacific in Suva, Fiji, in 1975. Now known as the Delegation of the

European Union to the Pacific, the EU's Fiji base remains the centre of its regional diplomatic outreach as it handles bilateral relations with Fiji, Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Kiribati, Nauru, Niue, Palau, Republic of the Marshall Islands, Samoa, Tonga, and Tuvalu, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu. The EU also has a delegation in PNG. Conversely, Niue, PNG, Samoa, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu have diplomatic missions in Belgium to manage the relationship with the OACPS Secretariat and EU institutions (Chapter 2). The EU became a PIF dialogue partner in 2000.

In addition to its conventional diplomatic presence, the EU created a new diplomatic position as part of its Indo-Pacific Strategy: the 'EU Special Envoy for the Indo-Pacific'. The main aim of this position, in the words of inaugural special envoy, Gabrielle Visentin, was to 'connect the dots' to implement EU strategy by 'explaining and creating consensus around the EU Indo-Pacific strategy' (Nishida 2021). To what degree the Pacific region is emphasised in this role is a source of scepticism given the clear emphasis the special envoys have placed on trade and geopolitical issues in the Indian Ocean and with China, although Visentin did visit Fiji in 2022.

Soft-power statecraft

Popular characterisations of the EU as a 'civilian' or 'normative' power typically cast the EU as an international actor which relies upon soft-power statecraft. One way of gauging soft power impact is by measuring the perceptions of a state in third countries. In one of the very few comprehensive studies on perceptions of the EU in the Pacific, Holland and Chaban (2011, p. 290) found that in the *Fiji Times*, the EU was often characterised as 'a benevolent authority talking at its Pacific partner, and a 'bully'. The EU significantly lags behind other powers – especially China, Australia, and New Zealand – in 'actor visibility' within Pacific media sources (Baugh 2023).

Characterising the EU as a bully limits its soft power appeal significantly. Furthermore, the typical soft power dimensions of the EU – focussed on democracy, human rights, rule of law, and market economy principles – run the risk of being perceived as too Eurocentric. As demonstrated by the recent emergence of great power competition in the Pacific, notions of the conflict between democracies and autocracies are largely seen as secondary to the issue of climate change (Wallis et al. 2023).

In 2022, the EU suspended Vanuatu's Schengen visa-waiver agreement (in place since 2015) over concerns about Vanuatu's Citizenship by Investment scheme being linked to corruption and the movement of criminals (McNeill and Walton 2024).[2] The EU's threatened suspension of the visa-waiver scheme affected Vanuatu's government revenue dramatically, negatively affecting development outcomes. The EU eventually paused their suspension and entered into dialogue with Vanuatu between 2023 and 2024 but inevitably ceased the visa-waiver programme in August 2024. Visa issues have led to much

contention in Vanuatu media and by ni-Vanuatu politicians about the EU's relationship with Vanuatu and supposed support for Pacific priorities.

France

France is the only European state to maintain bilateral and regional relationships in the Pacific Islands region, mostly due to its territories in the region: New Caledonia, French Polynesia, and Wallis and Futuna. France deploys statecraft at three levels: bilaterally as a metropolitan power; multilaterally either as a metropolitan power or by proxy through its territories, which are members of regional groupings; and through EU membership.

Like other partners, France increased its interest in the Pacific through its 2021 *Indo-Pacific Strategy*. It is argued that France is the only allied state to be 'tilting' at the Indo-Pacific for reasons beyond trade, to maintain its vast geostrategic territory (Frécon 2022). President Macron suggested that in the Pacific Islands region, France can pose an 'alternative' to China, which he denounced as performing 'predatory behaviour' (Needham 2023; Prasad 2023). Like-minded partners have welcomed France's renewed energy for the region: Australia describes France as a 'close friend' (despite the aforementioned AUKUS debacle) with which it undertakes 'joint efforts in the region', and that it values 'France's contribution to security and prosperity in the Pacific' (Wong 2023).

France is not without controversy in the region. France's legacy of nuclear testing in French Polynesia between 1966 and 1996 created significant radioactive fallout resulting in displacement, ocean contamination, and significant health security challenges, including high cancer rates (Macumber, Smith and Matthews 2023). At the time, significant protest generated the impetus for the PIF's 1985 South Pacific Nuclear Free Treaty. Fiji, Australia, and New Zealand took France to the International Court of Justice over the matter, and France was forced to cease atmospheric testing (and instead shifted to underground testing). Memories of nuclear testing have not quelled in the region, with nuclear issues still frequently raised regarding the Pacific's relationship with France (Prasad 2023).

Similarly, France stands accused of suppressing self-determination in the Pacific Islands region – not engaging with its colonial legacy, let alone its contemporary situation. French officials argued that 'ongoing French colonial control in New Caledonia was crucial to France's Indo-Pacific strategy' (Maclellan 2021, p. 200). Kanaks in New Caledonia have sought independence from France for decades. Under the Nouméa Accords, the first two referenda (in 2018 and 2020) showed incremental progress towards independence; however, the third referendum was set by France in 2021, during the COVID-19 period, and a year earlier than expected – Kanaks were unhappy, and most boycotted the vote (Chappell 2022). This raised questions about the referendum's legitimacy – including from the PIF and Melanesian

Spearhead Group (MSG) – and 'widespread unease' towards France grew around the region (Maclellan 2022). President Macron subsequently visited Nouméa in 2023, although Kanak independence leaders were absent and later described Macron's speech in New Caledonia as 'paternalistic, imperialist, neo-colonial', prioritising geopolitical strategy over New Caledonia's needs (quoted in Fisher 2023). Subsequently, and perhaps blind to the hypocrisy, when Macron visited Vanuatu – a country where France had once been a colonial power – on the same visit, he denounced 'new imperialism' of Chinese influence in the region (Rose 2023). As France proceeded with a constitutional amendment (now halted) to allow recent arrivals to New Caledonia to participate in elections in May 2024, riots broke out in New Caledonia, killing several police officers and locals – France deployed 600 mainland police and gendarmes to quell the violence, sent heavy military assets, and banned local access to Tiktok. It was suggested that local discontent would fuel support for China which uses discourse denigrating colonialism in the Pacific region, and France accused Azerbaijan of spreading disinformation on social media about French police (RNZ 2024). The PIF leaders agreed to deploy a mission to New Caledonia to assess the scale of unrest; however, French diplomats made this very difficult and there remain tensions between France and the PIF.

Security and Defence

France is active in security and defence cooperation in the Pacific Islands region, particularly relating to disaster relief and illegal, unregulated, and unreported (IUU) fishing. Under the FRANZ arrangement between France, Australia, and New Zealand [1992], PICs can request the group conduct disaster reconnaissance, and work with civil society to coordinate and conduct Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR). The French Armed Forces of New Caledonia lead biennial multilateral HADR training exercises, including Croix du Sud, which includes troops from New Caledonia, Australia, Fiji, New Zealand, PNG, Tonga, Chile, the US, and Vanuatu. On alternate years, the French Armed Forces of French Polynesia lead Exercise Marara, focussing on disaster assistance, evacuation of victims, and securing the area. Deployed from the Joint Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre in Tahiti, French naval vessels dedicated to maritime oil spills have visited countries in the region, exercising oil spill scenarios with local maritime agencies (McNeill et al. 2023).

France has been a member of South Pacific Defence Ministers' Meeting (SPDMM) since its inception in 2013, and in 2023, convened the SPDMM meeting in Nouméa. Through SPDMM, France is operationalising a 2019 French defence report regarding the 'impact of climate change on defence and security infrastructure' (Marles 2023). In a region that is known as 'complex and crowded', for France to offer and deliver on a unique contribution that does not duplicate others, distract from Pacific regionalism, or demand

additional resources from Pacific states, is positive. At the 2023 meeting, SPDMM resolved that France would develop a regional Pacific Military Academy to train 240 military officers from around the Pacific annually in HADR and combating IUU fishing.

France is a member of the Pacific Quadrilateral Defence Coordination Group (the Pacific QUAD) with the US, Australia, and New Zealand. This grouping supports Pacific states, coordinated by the Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA), with IUU compliance patrols. Over 60% of France's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) is in the Pacific Ocean, by virtue of its territories (Pajon 2023). Therefore, France has a strong interest in preventing IUU fishing and other illegal maritime activities. In 2021, the French Navy undertook more than 70 days of patrolling in the EEZs of Cook Islands, Fiji, PNG, Solomon Islands, Samoa, and Vanuatu (Frécon 2022). France has shiprider agreements with Pacific states, enabling Pacific Island compliance officers to embark French patrol vessels and vice versa to undertake IUU operations. In its annual 5-day PNG operation, *Rai Balang*, France sent a naval patrol vessel and military aircraft to conduct aerial and maritime surveillance, where French and Papua New Guinean officers sat alongside one another exchanging experiences and becoming friends – showing the soft power effects of defence statecraft (Loop PNG 2022).

France's maritime operations also help prevent transnational crime in the region. France is a member of regional law enforcement bodies via its territories of New Caledonia and French Polynesia, including the Pacific Immigration Development Community, Pacific Islands Chiefs of Police, Oceania Customs Organisation, and Joint Heads of Pacific Security. Security and defence issues remain the competencies of the French state, rather than devolved to the territory level, and as such, while the French territories have law enforcement agencies to manage borders, the senior roles are posted from France. This means that while the territories are involved in regional security discussions, this is nominal, and metropolitan French officials are usually the ones attending the meetings: conducting statecraft by proxy.

While France supports PICs via the FFA, until recently France has notably not held bilateral defence relationships with PICs outside multilateral-sponsored operations. The Pacific QUAD and FRANZ are coordination functions *about* the Pacific, but do not *include* PICs, potentially limiting France's direct influence. In a change of strategy to provide an 'alternative' to China, in 2023 France announced it would sign a bilateral defence cooperation and status of forces agreement with Fiji, covering 'joint defence technology research, training, logistical support and emergency and humanitarian assistance' (Needham 2023).

Economic statecraft

France's potential for economic statecraft is limited by its membership in the EU – as aforementioned, trade competency is held by Brussels. Furthermore,

French territories in the Pacific are not members of the regional free trade agreements, such as PACER Plus, but also do not benefit from EU free trade agreements with regional partners such as Australia and New Zealand. As only FLNKS is a member of MSG, the state of New Caledonia does not benefit from their free trade agreements, either.

Diplomatic statecraft

France has long been involved in Pacific regionalism as one of the founding members of the Pacific Community (then, South Pacific Commission (SPC)) in 1947. However, domination by colonial powers in this forum motivated independent PICs to establish the PIF in 1971. France (alongside its territories, which are also full members) remains a member of the SPC, which is headquartered in Nouméa. In 2021, France announced that SPC would be a major implementing agency for the €35m[3] KIWA initiative for climate change adaptation and biodiversity protection in the Pacific (Pacific Community 2021). Supporting France's scientific cooperation with the region, France is also a full member (alongside its territories) of the Secretariat for the Pacific Regional Environment Programme.

As a PIF Forum Dialogue Partner, France stated it 'fully adheres to the *Blue Pacific* narrative and entirely supports the Boe Declaration' and supports the Kainaki II Declaration on climate change (French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs 2021). Controversially, French Polynesia and New Caledonia were the first non-independent states to join the PIF as full members in 2016 following 'extensive French lobbying' (Maclellan 2021 p. 201).[4] The PIF deemed that France had sufficiently delegated authority to French Polynesia and New Caledonia, which would pursue their own interests, rather than France's, within the PIF. However, some PICs expressed concerns that 'accepting these territories as full members would reinforce France's influence over these archipelagos, to the detriment of local pro-independence parties' (Soyez 2016).

France has diplomatic missions in Fiji, PNG, and Vanuatu (the latter also a Francophone country). In addition to these long-standing missions, in 2023, President Macron announced that France would establish its first embassy in Polynesia, located in Samoa, place a defence attaché in the Embassy in Fiji, and expand the mission in PNG (Foon 2023). The Samoan Embassy was established to strengthen relations between French territories and Samoa, enable cooperation with the French Polynesian armed forces, and ultimately 'offer Paris greater clout' in the region (Foon 2023). No PICs have embassies in Paris, but Vanuatu is the only Pacific state to have an embassy in a French territory, New Caledonia, likely due to the strong ties through the MSG (Chapter 2).

The first-ever visit of a French President to an independent PIC was to Vanuatu in 2023, where Macron charmed the crowd by speaking Bislama

at the Melanesian Arts Festival and drinking kava. Macron discussed geo-politics, granted aid for schools damaged by cyclones, and agreed to resolve a long-standing UNCLOS dispute over the Matthew and Hunter islands (Bule and Wiseman 2023). Macron also visited PNG: while a Status of Forces Agreement was signed between the PNG Defence Force and the French Armed Forces in New Caledonia in 2022, suggesting that security was the priority, instead most of the visit focussed on environmental and resource protection.

Other partners have sought to benefit from their relationship with France, and the role of its territories in the region. Shortly after the Solomon Islands-China security pact was signed in 2022, New Zealand, Australia and France met and (unsuccessfully) suggested New Caledonia and French Polynesia should take positions on the pact (Hale 2024).

Soft-power statecraft

In 2021, the 5th France-Oceania Summit[5] discussed strengthening soft-power relationships, including at the French-hosted 2023 Rugby World Cup and 2024 Olympic Games (PIF 2021). At the 2023 Rugby World Cup, France's Ambassador of Sports engaged with Pacific journalists and suggested that through sports diplomacy, France could support states like Fiji (Singh 2023). Players from the Pacific Islands region, especially Fiji but also Samoa, feature prominently in France's professional rugby leagues. Additional investments into sports diplomacy were made available to French embassies in the region.

There are no specific scholarships for Pacific Islanders to France. Tahitian and New Caledonian students can study at French (and EU) universities, and French students can study at the University of New Caledonia and the University of French Polynesia. However, Pacific students who are not French citizens do not receive specific support to study in France. Indeed, the opposite is true, there are recommendations for the Australian Awards scholarships to be extended to French nationals in French Polynesia and New Caledonia (Piper and Gibert 2023). France does fund the *Pacific Fund for Economic, Social and Cultural Cooperation* for supporting research that involves organisations in Pacific French territories.

United Kingdom

The UK also has a significant colonial history in the region. Pitcairn Island is still administered by the British High Commissioner to New Zealand, although there are limited interactions between Pitcairn Island and the rest of the region.[6] Interestingly, anti-colonial sentiment in the Pacific towards Britain is not as negative as it is towards France, and in former territories and

protectorates like Fiji, Tonga, and Vanuatu, there is a mostly positive attitude towards the UK (Rodd 2023).

Britain also has a history of nuclear testing, having conducted hydrogen bomb testing between 1957 and 1962 in the now-independent state of Kiribati (Maclellan 2017). British reports found that British military officials received 'little or no additional radiation' from the testing; however, Fijian veterans serving in the British military at the time were seriously affected, but were not recognised by the British military or provided compensation, healthcare, or pensions by the institution they served (Maclellan 2017, p. 4). Under the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, Kiribati is co-chair (with Kazakhstan) of a group of states affected by nuclear testing to review the impacts of this testing.

In 2018, British diplomats recognised that 'quite frankly we stepped back too much from our Pacific friends and partners' and announced Britain's 'Pacific Uplift' – designed to parallel and complement Australian and New Zealand policies by centring on prosperity, security, and environmental issues including climate change (Clarke 2019; Rodd 2023). Britain also utilised its existing Commonwealth of Nations[7] network of small island developing states to develop the Commonwealth Blue Charter in 2018, and the Commonwealth Clean Oceans Alliance on plastic pollution.

Pursuing a strategic narrative of 'Global Britain' post-Brexit, Britain launched an 'Indo-Pacific Tilt' in 2021, responding to the perceived threat of Chinese influence by changing its strategic posture towards the region. Part of this tilt was joining AUKUS, which was initially not well-received by PICs due to the increased militarisation and memories of nuclear testing. While some PICs like Fiji subsequently supported AUKUS (following Australia's triage diplomacy), others still see the vast expense on military efforts like AUKUS as an affront and in contrast to Pacific security priorities like climate change (Brennan 2023).

Security and Defence

The UK is not as embedded in the defence architecture in the region as France, although joined the US-led Pacific Partnership 2022 exercise on HADR. The UK sent a C-17 with £2m worth of supplies, including shelter and solar lanterns, to Vanuatu after Cyclone Pam; health supplies after Cyclone Harold; and HMS Spey carried aid from Tahiti following the 2022 Tongan volcanic eruption and tsunami. In 2023, the UK participated in Exercise Cartwheel at Fiji's Blackrock Peacekeeping and HADR Camp, a training exercise between the US, UK, New Zealand, Australia, and Fiji, and in 2024, the UK conducted its first IUU patrol in Fiji's EEZ alongside Australia and New Zealand. Outside of HADR, there were criticisms that Britain 'left it entirely to Australia and New Zealand to intervene' in regional crises, even in former British territories – including riots in the Solomon Islands and Tonga (Rodd 2023 p. 608).

The UK's key defence relationship in the region is with Fiji – hundreds of Fijians have served in the British military, consistently the second largest cohort of foreign nationals serving in the British army (Clarke 2019; Chanel and Doherty 2020). The UK hosts a British Army Support Office in Fiji, reflecting this involvement. For the most part, 'Fijians who join the British Army do not feel exploited; they see it as an honourable duty that comes with economic benefits to improve their own welfare and those of their families'; indeed, British-serving Fijian military households 'develop a close connection with the United Kingdom' – a signal of effective statecraft (Waqavakatoga 2023). After 22 years of service, Fijian veterans are eligible for a full British pension; however, there have been some criticisms of contracts being ended early, leaving those who served without military accommodation (sometimes with British-born children), medical bills, and with irregular visa statuses in the UK facing potential deportation and being unable to return to the UK (Chanel and Doherty 2020). While the military relationship is positive, recognising the importance of protections for veterans would maintain the soft-power influence generated.

Economic statecraft

With Brexit, the UK gained economic competency back from the EU. In 2019, the UK signed provisional trade agreement deals with PNG and Fiji in 2019 as a 'temporary measure before bespoke free trade agreements' (Rodd 2023, p. 615); and in 2022, Samoa and Solomon Islands also signed. The UK is the recipient of ~6% of Fiji's exports, mostly food and clothing, including one-quarter of its sugar exports, which it buys at above-market prices (as a roll-over from the Cotonou Agreement) (Rodd 2023). The Solomon Islands similarly sends over 6% of its exports to the UK annually, and 3% of PNG exports (Dayant 2020).

The UK contributes ~0.4% of all aid to the region (Lowy Institute 2024). The UK provided £1.8m to strengthen Pacific health sectors during the COVID-19 pandemic through the *Pacific Conflict, Stability and Security Fund*, delivering ventilators, patient monitoring systems, and other essential equipment. After a significant aid reduction in 2021, in 2022 the UK announced a new aid strategy that would increase aid efforts in Africa and the Indo-Pacific in response to China, particularly focussed on Least Developed Countries. How that has been delivered in the Pacific Islands region though, is still to be seen.

Diplomatic statecraft

Despite being a founding member of SPC, the UK withdrew in 2004, and did not re-join until 2021. The renewal of membership led to an agreement worth £263,000 to finalise negotiations over maritime zones under UNCLOS. The UK is also a member of SPREP, and a PIF Forum Dialogue Partner. The Minister for the Indo-Pacific attended the Dialogue Partners meeting in 2023 in

the Cook Islands, at which she supported the PIF's 2050 Strategy for a Blue Pacific Continent (Trevelyan 2023).

The UK has long-standing high commissions in Fiji, the Solomon Islands, and PNG. In 2006, it closed British posts in Kiribati, Vanuatu, and Tonga as a 'cost-cutting measure' (Rodd 2023, p. 607), but re-opened the latter two (situated within New Zealand High Commissions in those countries) in 2018, when it also doubled the size of its mission in Fiji and established a self-contained high commission in Samoa. The new high commissions were purportedly to 'boost prosperity, tackle security issues and clear up the environment'; however, scholars argue that the new posts are 'little more than a small, fairly inexpensive way for Britain to strengthen its overall presence in the Asia-Pacific' and overt geostrategic posturing against the increasing influence of China (Rodd 2023, pp. 611–612).

Since 2018, the UK has deployed a range of visitors to the region. Initially, the focus was on the Royal Family, then-Prince Charles and the Duchess of Cornwall visited Vanuatu in 2018; the Duke and Duchess of Sussex enjoyed time in Tonga and Fiji later that same year, tasting kava; and Prince Charles and the Duchess of Cornwall visited Tuvalu and Solomon Islands in 2019. King Charles also met the Flying Fijian rugby team when they toured the UK in advance of the 2023 Rugby World Cup and will travel to Samoa in 2024 to attend the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting.

The Foreign and Commonwealth Office also (later) deployed ministerial visits to the region. British COP26 President, politician Alok Sharma, visited Fiji in 2022 to meet with Pacific High-Level Champions for COP and to see how climate change was affecting the region; the Minister of Asia and the Middle East Amanda Milling visited Vanuatu in 2022 to formally open the British high commission; Foreign Secretary James Cleverly visited PNG and Solomon Islands in 2023 – the first visit by a Foreign Secretary to the Pacific since the 1970s – to discuss the influence of China (although cancelled his visit to Samoa due to escalating violence in Sudan); and the then-Minister for the Indo-Pacific Anne-Marie Trevelyan attended PIF in Cook Islands, and visited Fiji and Tonga in 2023, stating that Britain is a 'steadfast supporter of Pacific priorities' (Trevelyan 2023).

Soft-power statecraft

Pacific Islanders are eligible for Chevening scholarships, a prestigious tertiary scholarship to attend a British university for Masters degrees. They are also eligible for a range of Commonwealth scholarships for both Masters and PhD study – notably one modality is a 'Commonwealth Distance Learning Scholarship' available to students from (amongst others) Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, PNG, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu. Given the significant role that scholarships play in statecraft (see Chapter 3), one does wonder if distance learning scholarships still generate the same goodwill and influence if the person does not travel to the host country?

In a similar vein, the UK revoked visa-free access for individuals travelling on Vanuatu passports, citing 'protecting national security' in relation to Vanuatu's Citizenship by Investment scheme as justification (UK Government 2023). The Vanuatu Government expressed 'profound dissatisfaction' and 'extreme disappointment and concern' about the unilateral decision (Willie 2023). It was a failure of the UK's diplomatic statecraft not to let the Vanuatu Government know in advance of the press release announcing the decision. Vanuatu Deputy Prime Minister Jotham Napat 'question[ed] the UK's commitment to Vanuatu's development agenda' and stated that the visa decision 'does not reflect the true spirit of friendship and partnership that binds the two countries together' after more than a century (Willie 2023). In addition, the decision will likely have ongoing consequences for soft power statecraft where ni-Vanuatu travellers (not necessarily those on golden passports) will find it more difficult to access the UK (McNeill and Walton 2024).

Conclusions

European actors, both as former and current colonial powers in the Pacific Islands region, have recently shown significant intention to reengage. However, blind Eurocentrism and the complications of the different competencies of the EU and member states often gets, in the way of effective statecraft. There is inconsistency in engagement – where France almost exclusively deploys security and defence statecraft, and mostly with other partners rather than PICs directly; whereas the EU engages in trade but barely on security and defence. Some (perhaps, rash) decisions by the UK and EU regarding visas, and the complicated nature of European bureaucracy can undermine the intentions of statecraft, and deter Pacific receptivity to European statecraft. Finally, there are different perceptions of colonialism in the region – France usually is perceived negatively, reducing diplomatic efforts; whereas the positive perception of British colonial legacy and the importance of the Royal Family, can actually improve statecraft efforts. There are complex lines to walk for former colonial powers, and successful European statecraft in the region will require adept and reflexive policymaking in Brussels, Paris, London (and Berlin).

Notes

1 Notably, EU member-states also contribute foreign aid, although it can be small, ranging from Malta's USD$5,323, to Iceland, Lithuania, Denmark, Slovenia, Czech Republic, and Hungary donating between USD$20,000 and $65,000 each over a period of 13 years (Lowy Institute, 2024).
2 Vanuatu was the first country to receive a visa-waiver suspension on this basis.
3 Including €13m from France, and €14m from the EU.
4 Wallis and Futuna remained an Observer.
5 Since 2001, the France-Oceania Summit has been held between independent Pacific states, French territories in the Pacific, and France, largely focussing on climate change and environmental issues.

6 Pitcairn Island is a member of SPC, as is the UK.
7 Pacific Commonwealth members are: PNG, Solomon Islands, Tuvalu, Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Samoa, Tonga, and Vanuatu.

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12 China's strategic narratives in the Pacific[1]

Geyi Xie

Introduction

Most analyses of China's statecraft in the Pacific Islands region have focused primarily on whether China's expenditure of material resources – whether they be aid, loans, scholarships, investment, and the activities of state-owned corporations – can reshape regional order in its favour (Smith and Wesley-Smith, 2021; Zhang 2022a). Analysts have argued that Chinese 'influence and interference' is 'quite brazen', with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) characterised as a tool of 'grand strategy' (Connolly 2016). They have said that China has the objective of 'counterattack[ing] the perceived US containment of China by opening a "new battlefield" for "political influence and economic competition in the South Pacific" and "ensur[ing] China's rise at the systemic (global) level"' (Lei and Sui 2022, p. 83). In particular, analysts have expressed concern about the risk of China engaging in 'debt-trap diplomacy', whereby it could instrumentalise its civilian infrastructure projects for military purposes if Pacific countries are unable to service their loans (Parker and Chefitz 2018), with China's military base in Djibouti a frequently mentioned analogy (Smith and Wesley Smith 2021). Although these claims have been debunked (Jones and Hameiri 2022), they remain influential in Washington, Canberra, and other metropolitan capitals.

This chapter shifts its focus to exploring China's efforts to use ideational resources in the Pacific Islands region by examining the strategic narratives that China has deployed in the region. Analysts have argued that China has sought to advance its foreign policy by using ideational resources such as its 'soft power assets', based on the 'intense and extremely active promotion of China through diplomacy and culture' (Courmont and Delhalle 2022). It has been claimed that China's 'South–South cooperation narrative', whereby it seeks to 'cultivate the idea that, like the island states, it too is a developing country', has built 'a level of engagement, respect and esteem that's deepening the well of Beijing's soft power in the region' (Herr 2019, p. 4). This has led other metropolitan powers to deploy counter-narratives, with, for example, Australia framing itself as a member of the 'Pacific family' (see Chapter 8) and New Zealand emphasising its 'Pacific identity' (see Chapter 9). These narratives have been

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accompanied by significant increases in the expenditure of material resources. Seeking to capitalise on this interest, Pacific Island countries (PICs) have also worked together within the PIF, the region's preeminent multilateral institution, to strategically deploy the narrative of the 'Blue Pacific' to influence partner countries to adopt policies that reflect regional priorities (see Chapter 6).

Based on extensive analysis of Chinese official discourse, this chapter identifies the three relatively consistent strategic narratives in the Pacific Islands region over the last decade. It argues that China has built on its narrative of shared historical and colonial experience to support its narrative of the value of South–South cooperation, which it has used, in turn, to justify its narrative of the opportunities offered under its BRI.

Background and methodology

There is a developing literature that analyses how China has sought to exercise narrative power (Blanchard 2017; Lams 2018; Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Zeng, 2021; and Van Noort, 2022). Some scholars have concluded that 'China is not currently seeking to overthrow the existing international order. Instead, it intends to reform it to better suit its own values and interests' (Yang 2021; Zhang and Orbie 2021). Others have concluded that 'Chinese leaders and elites… have actively produced their counternarratives of the world order, arguing and pushing for the restructuring of the existing international order' (Li 2019, p. 375), and have therefore 'employed a multifaceted narrative strategy to influence existing norms and create new ones' (Yang 2021, p. 300), as part of a 'diplomatic strategy to alter global perception and their possible influences on the emerging world order' (Chang 2021, p. 28). It has been argued that China uses 'geocultural power' to project an identity as a promoter of peace, harmony, and dialogue, crafting narratives of 'trade, open-borders, cosmopolitanism and inter-cultural dialogue' (Winter 2020, p. 1384).

After considering how China has attempted to 'build up its discursive power', Jinghan Zeng concluded that China's narratives 'suffer from the problem of being overloaded – they become far too broad to be meaningful' (Zeng 2017, p. 1173). Indeed, Zeng has argued that 'Chinese foreign policy concepts should be understood as political slogans rather than concrete strategic plans', and that therefore many analyses of China's narratives 'tend to overinterpret the strategic rationale of those Chinese concepts' (Zeng 2020, pp. 1–2), particularly as some analysts 'have pre-existing views and then selectively look for Chinese literature to support those views' (Zeng 2020, p. 12). Yet he says that analysing China's narratives still has value, as they 'function as slogans to signal not only China's new vision but also their implied power relations; in other words, the latter is a political gesture to assert China's regional (if not global) leadership', and to set regional and global agendas (Zeng 2020, p. 3).

To identify the narratives that China has deployed in the Pacific Islands region, this chapter begins by analysing official Chinese discourse, including public statements and policies adopted by the government in the form of official

communications. This analysis began in 2012 because data collection focused on official newsletters published by the Research Center for Pacific Island Countries (RCPIC) at Liaocheng University in China. Since 2012, research newsletters (Taipingyang Daoguo Yanjiu Tongxun or Taipingyang Daoguo Zixun) from RCPIC have covered a wide range of topics, such as Chinese diplomats in the Pacific (commonly known as visit diplomacy) (Zhang 2017a), conferences between the leaders from China and Pacific countries, policies, aid, and cooperation. Although these newsletters may not represent an exhaustive corpus of official discourse, given the potential for government censorship and filtering by the scholars who compile them, they contain many authoritative primary sources and provide a centralised source of Chinese news about the region.

Most of the translated data consisted of high-level official communication, including from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China (MFAPRC), Chinese embassies, and consulates. Since the original Chinese and official English translations target the same audiences, they generally convey similar meanings. However, the difference between official Chinese foreign policy statements and their English translations is a common challenge when analysing China's foreign policy because they may have nuanced meanings (Mokry 2022). My analysis focused on the discourse of Chinese leaders and officials, and as with all states, their language may not always reflect their true intentions. The challenge of determining whether state elites mean or believe what they say is heightened by the opaque political contexts of non-democratic states. However, this chapter follows the advice to 'avoid focusing on unanswerable questions about actors' motives and to examine instead what actors say, in what context, and to what audiences' (Krebs and Jackson 2007). That is, it is not interested in discovering China's motives, but instead in identifying what narratives Chinese leaders and officials have chosen to articulate. It is also acknowledged that China is not a 'unitary actor'; rather, there are multiple actors 'loosely associated with "China"', each capable of 'representing different agencies' at various levels with different interests (Zhang 2022b).

Historical/colonial narrative

The first identified narrative deployed by China is an international system narrative that describes the world as being structured to position states such as China and PICs, that have shared historical stories of colonial oppression, in contrast to metropolitan states such as the United States (US) and Australia, which were (or still are) colonial powers. This narrative gained prominence in the lead-up to Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to Fiji in November 2014. Approximately a week before Xi's visit, the Chinese Ambassador to Fiji published a media article in which he argued that: 'due to long-term colonial plunder and geographical constraints, economic development of Pacific Island countries has fallen relatively behind' (Huang 2014, pp. 32–33). The ambassador to Vanuatu also published a media article which claimed that China and PICs share 'similar historical experiences'

and have 'common ideals and pursuits' (Huang 2014, p. 32; Xie 2014, pp. 34–36). Xi then published an article in the Fijian media that echoed these ideas (Xi 2014).

The historical/colonial narrative also draws on stories about shared experiences during the Second World War. For example, in September 2015, on the 70th anniversary of the Second Sino-Japanese War, the Chinese Ambassador to Fiji, Zhang Ping, emphasised that: '[China] will never forget … the contributions made by Fiji and other Pacific Island Countries who were members of world anti-fascist alliance' (Embassy of the PRC in Fiji 2015a). In this context, drawing on China's broader global narrative of being a 'responsible great power' (fu zeren daguo) (Consulate-General of the PRC in Adelaide 2023; MFAPRC 2023), China was presented as playing an important role 'in safeguarding world peace' (Consulate-General of the PRC in Adelaide 2023), as 'an active participant, constructor and contributor of the current international order and system' dedicated to 'maintaining world peace and regional stability' (Embassy of the PRC in Fiji 2015c). That role was used as the basis for arguing that, reflecting a world structured around a division between formerly imperial and colonised states, China and Fiji were now responsible for 'maintaining global and regional order' to have a 'peaceful, stable and favorable international environment' to improve national development (Embassy of the PRC in Fiji 2015d).

Indeed, reflecting the implied division between formerly imperial and colonised states, Chinese leaders and officials frequently seek to emphasise that, following China's foreign policy of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, China approaches PICs guided by the principles of 'cooperation', 'mutual respect', 'mutual trust', and respect for their independence (Consulate-General of the PRC in Surabaya 2015; Embassy of the PRC in Fiji 2018; MFAPRC 2014). For example, during his 2014 visit to Fiji, Xi met with the leaders of the (then) eight PICs that had diplomatic ties with China to negotiate a strategic partnership. During his speech, Xi highlighted that:

> China respects social systems and development path[s] independently chosen by each island country in line with their national conditions, supports them managing and deciding regional affairs in their own way, and backs them equally participating in international affairs and safeguarding their legitimate rights and interests.
>
> (The Embassy of the PRC in New Zealand (Cook Islands, Niue) 2014)

This emphasis on respect for PICs independence is presented in contrast to the US, Australia, and other metropolitan powers. For example, in 2018, Foreign Ministry spokesperson Geng Shuang commented that China acted in the region 'with sincerity, real results, affinity and good faith', while arguing that Australia acted as 'a condescending master' (Embassy of the PRC in PNG, 2019). In 2019, Xi told several Pacific leaders that China 'pursues no selfish

interest or so-called "sphere of influence"' in the region (Embassy of the PRC in the Hellenic Republic 2019). In 2022, Chinese Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Xie Feng commented that:

> Those who spread rumours, smear, slander, coerce, and intimidate others expose that they are still reluctant to give up their mania for colonisation in the 21st century … racking their brains and trying to control Pacific Island countries to safeguard the so-called 'sphere of influence'. The Pacific is the shared home of countries in the region, not some countries' 'backyard' or 'territory'.
>
> (Center for Pacific Island Countries Studies (CPICS), 2022, pp. 28–30)

References to 'sphere of influence' and 'backyard' are intended to emphasise the story of a world structured around a division between formerly imperial and colonised countries, as it is an implicit criticism of Australia, where it is common to refer to the Pacific Island region as Australia's 'backyard' (see Chapter 4). References to 'territory' are similarly an implicit criticism of the US, which has territories in the region and frequently refers to itself as a 'Pacific nation'. The language of the sphere of influence (*shili fanwei*) is meaningful in China where it has a negative meaning due to its association with the efforts of Western powers to colonise and exert influence over China in the late 19th century (Wang 2007).

South–South cooperation

The second narrative identified, that of 'South–South cooperation', is an identity narrative that seeks to position China and PICs as developing countries with shared stories, values, and goals. Drawing on the historical/colonial international system narrative, it continues to emphasise a world structured around a division between formerly imperial (global North) and colonised (global South) states. For example, Xi has emphasised that China respects and supports 'the development path chosen independently by the Pacific people' (The Embassy of the PRC in New Zealand (Cook Islands, Niue), 2014) and opposes 'great-power chauvinism' (Embassy of the PRC in the Hellenic Republic 2019) and 'long-term colonial plunder and geographical constraints' (Huang 2014). Therefore, as a fellow member of the global South, China claims to be willing to assist Pacific countries in pursuing their goals on the international stage, as 'all countries, big or small, rich or poor, strong or weak, are equal members of the international community' (Yu 2018; MFAPRC 2018b).

The South–South cooperation narrative is challenged by the gulf in economic size between China and PICs. To counter this, President Xi Jinping has highlighted that 'no matter how developed China is, it will always be a member of the developing countries and will always stand side by side with other developing countries' (MFAPRC 2018a). On this basis, Xi has encouraged

PICs to 'board the express train of China's development' (ibid.). In an implicit critique of global North powers, which frequently attach governance or other conditionalities to their assistance, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi stressed that 'China has never interfered in other countries' internal affairs, never attached political conditions to aid for other countries, and never targeted third parties' (MFAPRC, 2018c).

Chinese diplomats use the South–South narrative to claim that China shares the values and goals of other states in the global South, including PICs. For example, Chinese officials have expressed empathy with PICs who have 'borne the brunt' of climate change (Embassy of the PRC in Fiji 2016). In September 2015, Chinese Ambassador to PNG Du Qiwen emphasised to Pacific leaders China's willingness to 'play a constructive role in the international climate change negotiation and safeguard the common interests of developing countries' (Embassy of the PRC in PNG, 2015). In November 2015, Ambassador Zhang Ping published an article stating that: 'Some of the small islands are even facing existential threat. Both being developing countries, China deeply empathizes with Pacific Island Countries about the adverse effects posed by climate change and has provided assistance, within its means' (Embassy of the PRC in Fiji 2015b). China has accordingly donated to the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme (Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme 2018), provided training on mitigating natural disasters for Pacific government officials (Chen 2021), and launched the China-Pacific Island Countries Climate Change Cooperation Center in April 2022 (CPICS 2022). China has also emphasised its claimed support for the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Zhang 2017b), which PICs played a major part in negotiating. To support implementation of the SDGs, China has established a South–South Cooperation Fund for developing countries with an initial contribution of US$2 billion (Wang 2015b). It has also forgiven some debt, agreeing in 2015 to forgive outstanding interest-free loans to certain least developed, landlocked, and small island developing countries (Embassy of the PRC in the Kingdom of Tonga 2015).

China's South–South cooperation narrative draws on the Chinese foreign policy concept of the 'community of common destiny' (CCD). The CCD concept reflects the idea of 'shared interests and destiny' between China and other states, as well as the necessity of 'address[ing] common challenges in partnership' (Zhang 2018, p. 198). It has been drawn on to express China's claimed wish to 'maintain the status quo of the international order and has no intention to introduce fundamental changes' (ibid.). Xi emphasised the CCD concept for global governance at the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in May 2017 (ibid., p. 196). This concept has since been widely adopted by lower-level Chinese delegates. For example, in January 2018 Charge d'Affaires of the Chinese Embassy in Fiji Gu Yu stated that the new bridges signify '"bridges of future" … in addressing climate change and in building a community of shared future for mankind' (The State Council Information Office 2018). In early 2018, two Chinese ambassadors also mentioned

that, within the framework of South–South cooperation, China works alongside PICs to promote the construction of the CCD concept (Wang and Lyu 2018a, 2018b).

Therefore, the South–South cooperation narrative builds on the historical/colonial narrative to further seek to justify China's role in the Pacific region 'as a major developing country' (Embassy of the PRC in PNG, 2015), and to displace metropolitan power such as Australia and the US (Wang and Lyu 2016).

The BRI

The third identified strategic narrative is a policy narrative, based around China's BRI, that frames China's policy approach to the region as a natural progression of the two preceding narratives. This narrative sets out why the BRI is needed and desirable for PICs, by positioning them as 'a natural extension' of the BRI and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (Wang 2015a; Wang and Lyu 2017b). Since 2015, several Chinese government officials have presented the BRI as 'new platform for South–South cooperation, which will provide new opportunities and impetus for cooperation between China and PICs; the BRI will make a positive contribution to the realisation of the UN 2030 SDGs' (Chinese Embassy in Fiji 2019). Accordingly, in 2018, Xi urged PICs to 'seize upon the opportunity' of signing and 'jointly building the BRI' to facilitate better bilateral trade (MFAPRC, 2018a).

To counter American and Australian depictions of the BRI as a 'debt trap', Chinese officials present it as a desirable 'opportunity' to escape the 'underdevelopment' and 'non-development trap' (Liang and Lyu 2019b). Chinese diplomats have said that the policy will create more opportunities for Chinese enterprises to invest in the Pacific Islands region, and that the Chinese government will carry out more aid projects (Wang and Lyu 2017a; Jiang and Lyu 2018; Liang and Lyu 2019a). Drawing on the BRI narrative, Chinese delegates have talked about deepening cooperation in the region in various areas, such as infrastructure, trade, tourism, education (Wang 2015b), agricultural and side-line products (Wang 2015c), preferential loans, and technical assistance projects (Wang and Lyu 2017a). Therefore, the BRI narrative seeks to align with the priorities of PICs on issues such as 'green development and blue economy' (ibid.) and with the 'national development goals' of Pacific countries (Embassy of the PRC in Fiji 2015b; MFAPRC, 2018b), while safeguarding 'the legitimate interests of small and medium-sized developing countries' (MFAPRC 2018b).

Conclusion

China has deployed three relatively consistent strategic narratives in the Pacific Islands region over the last decade. It has built on its narrative of shared historical and colonial experience to support its narrative of the value of South–South cooperation, which it has used, in turn, to justify its narrative of the

opportunities offered under its BRI. Whether these narratives have been an effective tool of statecraft that has successfully influenced PICs to change their behaviour, beliefs, attitudes, and/or opinions is analysed in Chapter 13.

Note

1 This chapter is excerpted from: Joanne Wallis, Geyi Xie, William Waqavakatoga, Priestley Habru, and Maima Koro, 'Ordering the Islands? Pacific Responses to China's Strategic Narratives', *Chinese Journal of International Politics* (2023) 16(4): 457–481.

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13 How do Pacific Island countries respond to China's statecraft?[1]

William Waqavakatoga, Priestley Habru, and Maima Koro

Introduction

There have been relatively few analyses of how Pacific Island countries (PICs) have responded to China's statecraft. While a 2021 edited book (Smith and Wesley-Smith 2021) discussed how certain PICs had responded to the material aspects of China's statecraft, this chapter turns its attention to how they have interpreted, adopted, and/or instrumentalised one of China's most important soft power tools of statecraft: strategic narratives. It begins from the observation that there is a risk that the reception and impact of China's narratives in the Pacific Islands region have been overestimated. Indeed, there has been little scholarly analysis of how 'narratives are received, interpreted and become meaningful to audiences' in the Pacific Islands or beyond (Miskimmon and O'Loughlin 2021, p. 29). Few studies have attempted 'theorizing or tracing how one state's strategic narrative is received by a target state, and how this comes to be appropriated in their subsequent strategic narratives' (Colley and Van Noort 2022, p. 21). This chapter, therefore, follows Thomas Colley and Carolijn van Noort, who have sought to analyse 'whether states adopt the strategic narrative of others as they justify foreign policies' (Colley and Van Noort 2022, p. 22).

Based on case studies of Fiji, Solomon Islands, and Samoa, this chapter argues that while Fijian, Solomon Islander, and Samoan leaders have incorporated elements of the three strategic narratives deployed in the region by China identified and analysed in Chapter 12, historical/colonial, South–South cooperation, and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), into their discourse when justifying their foreign policies, they have done so using their own interpretations and, at times, instrumentalised those narratives for their own purposes. This suggests that narrative power is more limited than it is often assumed, although it may have indirect effects, with China's narratives in the Pacific Islands region, as well as their instrumental adoption by PICs, motivating changes in the policies and narratives of metropolitan powers.

Methodology

To conduct our study, we used discourse analysis techniques (Dunn and Neumann 2016) to analyse how the leaders of Fiji, Solomon Islands, and

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Samoa interpreted, adopted, and/or instrumentalised China's strategic narratives when publicly justifying their foreign policies. As noted, we used the three Chinese strategic narratives identified in Chapter 12. Our data came from each state's official discourse, including public statements and policies adopted by the respective governments. An important aspect of our analysis was cultural literacy, with the analysis of each of Fiji's, Solomon Islands', and Samoa's discourses conducted by a national of the country in question. This meant that we were able to consider how each Pacific leader's interpretations had been shaped by not only history, contemporary international relations, and domestic political interests, but also by cultural and societal understandings, norms, and signals. It also meant that we were able to analyse sources in both country's language and English.

We chose our three case studies as each plays a key role in the region: Fiji as the host of many regional institutions, Solomon Islands as the country closest to China, and Samoa as an assertive foreign policy player. Fiji has a population of approximately 930,000 people and was ranked 104 (out of 193) on the 2024 Human Development Index (HDI), meaning that it is considered to have a 'high' level of human development. Solomon Islands has a population of approximately 724,000 people and was ranked 156 on the HDI, meaning that it has a 'medium' level of human development. Samoa has a population of approximately 222,000 people and was ranked 116 on the HDI, meaning that, like Fiji, it is considered to have a 'high' level of human development. Both Fiji and Solomon Islands are in the geographic and cultural sub-region of Melanesia, and Samoa is in Polynesia. Given their locations, Australia is the metropolitan state with which Fiji and Solomon Islands have had their closest relations, while Samoa has had its closest relations with New Zealand. There are eleven other independent states in the Pacific Islands region, as well as other territories, that span across 30 percent of the surface of the earth and consist of a range of atolls and islands, as well as the much larger territory of PNG (which also has a considerably higher population, with upper estimates of ten million people or more). The region is characterised by diversity, including languages, cultures, socio-political organisation (although all states are democracies), economic development, and diplomatic relations, with several states in compacts of free association with either the United States (US) or New Zealand, and several territories of the US, France, or New Zealand. Therefore, while our analysis of Fiji, Solomon Islands, and Samoa may be indicative of how China's strategic narratives have been received in the region, it is impossible to draw definitive generalisations given the diversity of the region.

Fiji

In May 2022, then-Fijian Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama hosted Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi during his tour of the Pacific Islands region. The meeting was a warm one, and the two leaders reaffirmed the long-standing

relationship between their two countries, noting the frequently referenced fact that Fiji was the first PIC to establish diplomatic relations with China in 1975.

Fijian leaders have long been some of the most active in the region in seeking deeper ties with China. Former Prime Minister Lasenia Qarase visited China twice, and during his second visit in 2004 reaffirmed Fiji's commitment to the 'one-China policy' and that the 'only relations' maintained with Taiwan would be 'promotion of unofficial economic and commercial ties'. A joint communique Qarase signed during his visit stated the two countries were 'ready to press ahead with official and people-to-people exchanges and cooperation on all fronts and at all levels in a bid to increase mutual understanding and friendship' (Xinhua News Agency 2004).

After Qarase was removed from office in a coup led by Bainimarama in 2006, relations between Fiji and China deepened. Not long after he seized power, Bainimarama expressed his confidence that, while other long-term partners such as the US, Australia, and New Zealand had condemned his actions, China 'would always be there' because Fiji 'always had close ties with Beijing' (quoted in The Age 2006). This was Fiji's third military coup, but unlike the two coups in 1987 led by Sitiveni Rabuka (and a civilian coup in 2000), the 2006 military coup received a more pronounced diplomatic reaction from traditional partners the US, Australia, and New Zealand. Fiji was suspended from the PIF and Commonwealth in 2009, which created an opportunity for China to develop closer relations. Indeed, under Bainimarama's leadership (2006–2022), relations between Fiji and China strengthened considerably, aided by the fact that China did not decry Fiji for the 2006 coup nor attempt to isolate it. This was despite leaked diplomatic cables showing Australia's attempt to discourage then Vice President Xi Jinping from visiting Fiji in February 2009:

> The Australian Ambassador told VFM [Vice-Foreign Minister] He Yafei that China should join international efforts led by the Pacific [Islands] Forum to push Fiji toward democratic reform, but instead it seemed that China was using the opportunity to deepen ties with the country just when other countries were pulling back.
>
> (Field 2011)

Indeed, China seized the opportunity to deepen its relations with Fiji. Then Chinese Vice President Xi Jinping's visit to Fiji in February 2009 resulted in several development assistance deals being signed with the interim Fiji Government. After Fiji was suspended from the PIF and the Commonwealth, China reaffirmed its support with then-President Hu Jintao stating that: 'The Chinese Government attaches great importance to China–Fiji relations and considers Fiji a good friend and partner in the Pacific region' (Fiji Government 2009). This statement bestowed the legitimacy that Bainimarama sought at a time of diplomatic isolation, and his appreciation was reflected in communiques and bilateral agreements in the years following. China was also an

important partner in providing the platform and influence for Fiji's increased international recognition. In 2010, Fiji joined the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), and at the 2012 NAM Leaders' Summit, Fijian Minister of Foreign Affairs Ratu Inoke Kubuabola stated that:

> We have learned from our own experience that we should not give in to the bullying tactics by powerful states, who on one hand, claim to champion human rights and freedoms but on the other, have less to no regard for the rights of sovereign states to determine their own affairs consistent with the needs and aspirations of their peoples.
>
> It is therefore imperative that we must not, at any time, condone any form of discrimination based on neo-colonialist categorizations that make some inferior than others. Mr. Chairman, to do otherwise clearly undermines the founding principles and objectives of the Movement and of the UN Charter.
>
> (Fiji Government 2012)

Therefore, while Fijian leaders referenced Fiji's colonial past, which has some resonance with China's strategic narrative of shared historical and colonial experience, they did so instrumentally to advance Fiji's interest in broadening its diplomatic options in response to the isolation attempts of Australia and other partners following the 2006 coup. Fiji managed to leverage these new diplomatic relationships effectively. It used its membership in the NAM as a platform from which to successfully push for selection as the chair of the G77 and China in 2013. With China's support, Fiji also managed to secure significant positions at the United Nations, including Fijian diplomat Peter Thomson being elected as president of the General Assembly in 2016 and Fiji's ambassador to the United Nations in Geneva, Nazhat Shameem Khan, being elected as president of the Human Rights Council in January 2021 (see Chapter 2).

Recognising the value of deepening ties with China as a counter to the isolation efforts of Australia and other partners, the Fiji interim government adopted a 'Look North' foreign policy to draw closer to China. Bainimarama emphasised that China 'recognized their sovereignty' which was 'very important' to Fiji (Sky News Australia 2012). In addition, Bainimarama confirmed that China's relationship with Fiji was 'strengthened' because of the 'opportunity' that presented itself after the 'withdrawal of Australia and New Zealand'. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs acting permanent secretary Esala Nayasi pointed out that, 'after not being able to sink [sic] well with traditional partners', Fiji 'strongly pursued the Look North Policy' which was a 'turning point in foreign policy' (Fiji Times 2015). In 2011, the Fiji interim government signed a memorandum of understanding with China that allowed Fijian police officers to be trained in China and Chinese police officers to deploy to Fiji.

In 2014, Fiji returned to democracy, with elections held under the new 2013 Constitution. But while this created space for the US, Australia, and

other partners to reengage formally with Fiji, China was keen to ensure that it would not be sidelined. In the lead-up to the election, Vice Minister of the International Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China Yu Hongjun stated that: 'we respect the right of the people of Fiji to choose their development consistent with their own national characteristic and believe the people have the capability to move it forward in building their own future' (Hong'e 2014).

Shortly after the 2014 election, Sino-Fiji relations further developed, with a state visit by President Xi Jinping to Suva. At the state dinner, then Fiji President Ratu Epeli Nailatikau observed that: 'during the past eight years we are indeed grateful that China has been constantly by Fiji's side through thick and thin so to speak. And quietly nurturing the saying, "A friend in need is a friend indeed". And might I add that China is a friend indeed and more'. Xi Jinping in his speech responded:

> Our two countries have been respecting and supporting each other for common development and common progress. Now the seeds of friendship have bloomed and yielded fruits. I have brought with me on this trip, to Fiji, the friendly relations of the Chinese people towards the Fijian people. And the purpose of the visit is to deepen our traditional friendship, promote mutually beneficial cooperation between us, and also advance a shared lofty course of common development.
>
> (Fiji Government 2014)

The continued strengthening of relations was hailed by then-Prime Minister Bainimarama in 2015: 'Fiji will never forget the support that China gave us …While some of our traditional friends failed to understand our reform program and chose to punish us and damage our interests, China stood by us. And we will always remember – with immense gratitude – your understanding and support' (Fiji Government 2015). These statements highlight how Chinese and Fijian leaders used narratives of South–South cooperation and shared experiences of colonialism both to justify the deepening of their relationship and to differentiate it from the more tense relations that Fiji had with Australia and other metropolitan partners following its 2006 coup. Yet Fijian leaders were not parroting Chinese narratives but instead using them instrumentally to remind Australia and other traditional partners that Fiji had other diplomatic and development options, and consequently would not succumb to pressure to return to democracy until the Bainimarama regime was ready (Fiji Government 2015).

Fijian leaders have also adopted China's BRI narratives. In 2017, Bainimarama was the only Pacific leader to attend the inaugural Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in Beijing. At this Forum, President Xi expressed 'China's willingness to boost coordination and cooperation with Fiji under the United Nations framework, and maintain communication and coordination on major issues such as climate change' (Hou 2017). In 2018, Fiji

signed a memorandum of understanding on cooperation within the framework for the BRI. Fiji then received US$500,000 in humanitarian aid from China following two tropical cyclones in 2021. The assistance was given 'to strengthen the synergy of development strategies to jointly facilitate cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative' (Fiji Department of Information 2021).

In May 2022 Bainimarama hosted Wang Yi in Suva. During his visit, Wang noted that China was 'ready to enhance the synergy between the Belt and Road Initiative and Fiji's 20-Year National Development Plan' (Embassy of The People's Republic of China in The Republic of Fiji 2022). But while Bainimarama gave Wang a warm welcome, he was simultaneously courting diplomatic overtures from Australia, the US, and other partners. Recognising his ability to leverage these competing interests, Bainimarama used the BRI narrative to push back against China, seeking 'stronger commitment from China on climate action' and observing that 'geo-political point-scoring means less than little to anyone whose community is slipping beneath the rising seas' (Fiji Government 2022). In response, in October 2022, two Fijian newspapers ran the same China National Day message aimed at reassuring Fijians of China's commitment to addressing climate change:

> President Xi proposed the Global Security Initiative (GSI), which aims at fostering a new type of security that replaces confrontation, alliance and a zero-sum approach with dialogue, partnership and win-win results… China takes very seriously the single greatest threat facing PICs, and believes that climate change is a common challenge that requires the effort of everyone in the world.
>
> (Embassy of The People's Republic of China in The Republic of Fiji 2022)

Following the December 2022 national election, Bainimarama's government was replaced by a coalition led by Sitveni Rabuka. Since taking office, Rabuka has shown his desire for Fiji to recalibrate its relations with China to create some distance from the warm ties established by former Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama, in favour of traditional partners like Australia and the US. In January 2023, he stated that he saw 'no need' for the 2011 memorandum of agreement on police exchange with China to continue and has since confirmed that his government is considering whether to cancel the agreement entirely (The Guardian 2023). However, in March 2024, after an extensive review, Home Affairs Minister Pio Tikoduadua announced the policing agreement would continue. In March 2023, Taiwan announced it was informed 'via a note verbale' by Fiji's Ministry of Foreign Affairs to reinstate the name of its representative office in Suva. But there was no official announcement by the Fiji Government, and in 2024 the name 'Taipei Trade Office in Fiji' remains unchanged.

Solomon Islands

Wang Yi was also given a warm welcome during his May 2022 visit to Solomon Islands, where he met with then-Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare and then-Foreign Minister Jeremiah Manele. Wang's visit attracted considerable interest because it followed Solomon Islands switching diplomatic recognition to China in September 2019.

'The switch' had not been a snap decision. In 1982, then Foreign Affairs Minister, the late Ezekiel Alebua, visited China and recommended that Solomon Islands switch its recognition to China (Aqorau 2021, pp. 320–321). However, this was rejected by the then-Prime Minister, the late Solomon Mamaloni. But the idea continued to be a live one, with Gordon Darcy Lilo, who was Prime Minister from 2011 to 2014, observing that Solomon Islands was at liberty to review its relationship with Taiwan and 'explore other avenues' (Aqorau, 2021, p. 325).

The idea of switching diplomatic relations gained momentum in early 2019 when then-Prime Minister Ricky Houenipwela announced that his Democratic Alliance Party (DAP) would review Solomon Islands' diplomatic relations with Taiwan if they were re-elected at the April 2019 national election. He emphasised South–South cooperation and partnership as one of DAP's foreign policies, which reflected China's growing importance to Solomon Islands (Aqorau 2004, p. 321). After Houenipwela's party fell short of forming a government, new Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare decided to proceed with the switch, justifying it by pointing to the failure of traditional partners, including Taiwan, to progress the 'national development objectives and sustainable development goals' of Solomon Islands since independence in 1978 (Sogavare 2019). He argued that Solomon Islands was better served by making a decision that reflected its long-term development interests. Indeed, contrary to much commentary in metropolitan powers, which claimed that China had engaged in 'buying the Solomons' change of mind (quoted in Shoebridge 2019)', the decision to switch diplomatic recognition was a collective agenda of the Solomon Islands government based on a bi-partisan taskforce report, as described in Chapter 2. When announcing the switch, Sogavare pointed out that his government's decision to recognise the sovereignty of China reflected United Nations Resolution 2758, which was 'supported by all UN countries except for 16 underdeveloped nations' and 'our sovereign decision to sever the diplomatic relations is therefore consistent with International law (Sogavare 2019)'. He also pointed to the potential developmental benefits of formal diplomatic relations with China, arguing that:

> the future stability and well-being of Solomon Islands depends on our own ability to engage at the international level with development partners capable of advancing our national interests while we develop opportunities, strengthen our institutions, effectively manage resources and

> remain united in our quest for peace, prosperity, and progress in the future best interests of our country.
>
> (Sogavare 2019):

Other Solomon Islands leaders have subsequently also pointed to the perceived economic benefits of engaging with China through the BRI.[2]

While pointing to the developmental benefits of switching recognition to China, Sogavare also referred to a historical narrative about Solomon Islands' colonial past to critique Australia and other metropolitan powers and to justify his government's decision. During his announcement of the switch, Sogavare (2019) stated that:

> As long as our decision is consistent with international law, Solomon Islands will not allow itself to be used as a tool to satisfy the narrow geopolitical interest of foreign political powers. I will not allow that to happen.
>
> Solomon Islands is not a political football to be used by international interest groups that lack international credentials at the United Nations to achieve their narrow political or geopolitical interests.

Sogavare's reference to how metropolitan powers were perceived to have long pressured Solomon Islands resonates with China's historical/colonial strategic narrative. But rather than adopting this narrative due to influence from China, Sogavare instead instrumentalised it to put pressure on Australia and other metropolitan powers, who were (and still are) anxious about Solomon Islands' close relationship with China. This anxiety encouraged the US to reengage with Solomon Islands, including by reopening the embassy that it had closed after the Cold War, proposing a National Transport Initiative, and re-establishing the Peace Corps program almost 20 years after its closure. Similarly, Australia increased its already considerable engagement with Solomon Islands, including by pledging A$17 million to support Solomon Islands hosting the 2023 Pacific Games, and delivering police vehicles and rifles to Solomon Islands only weeks after Solomon Islands police officers travelled to China to undergo training for the first time.

Similarly, while Solomon Islands leaders have, at times, deployed South–South cooperation narratives, they have done so primarily in the context of their broader engagement with Pacific and Asian regional groupings, rather than specifically in relation to China. For example, when addressing the Asian–African Summit of Leaders in Jakarta in 2015, then Foreign Affairs Minister Milner Tozaka said that Solomon Islands valued South–South cooperation, as it will harness trade and investment for Solomon Islands and neighbouring PICs. He welcomed investment initiatives in tourism, agriculture, and other productive sectors that will empower Solomon Islanders. Rather than singling out China, Tozaka highlighted Solomon Islands' cooperation with Indonesia,

Malaysia, PNG, the Philippines, and Timor-Leste on the Coral Triangle Initiative on coral reefs, fisheries, and food security as examples of the South–South cooperation (SIBC 2015).

Indeed, Solomon Islands has embraced pan-Pacific efforts at South–South cooperation. For example, Solomon Islands joined the Pacific Islands Development Forum (PIDF) that the Fiji Government had instigated in 2012 following its 2009 suspension from the PIF. The PIDF offered a regional forum for South–South cooperation (Australia, New Zealand and the US were specifically excluded). At the 2019 PIDF Leaders' Summit, then Deputy Prime Minister of Solomon Islands John Maneniaru joined other Pacific leaders by endorsing the role of 'South-South Cooperation in the Sustainable Development of the Pacific'. In his speech, Maneniaru observed that: 'The theme for this conference [South-South Cooperation for a resilient Pacific] provides the platform upon which we will explore new ways of thinking, working and forging new partnerships between and amongst ourselves and with our development partners to jointly pursue sustainable development and poverty eradication in the Pacific Islands' (United Nations Office for South-South Cooperation, 2019). Maneniaru also emphasised that the Pacific would benefit from a multi-stakeholder partnership in building long-term prosperity for the region. However, Maneniaru was not parroting China's narratives, as two months later he was among six members of the Sogavare coalition government who were terminated for either abstaining or voting against switching diplomatic ties to China (RNZ 2019).

Therefore, while Solomon Islands' leaders have used South–South narratives, they developed these narratives outside the context of Solomon Islands' relationship with China, and with reference to a wide range of partners from the global South. They have also used these narratives to encourage China to provide more support. For example, Special Envoy for the China-PIF Dialogue Wang Xuefeng addressed the PIF leaders' meeting in 2019 and pledged that China would provide support to combat climate change and support the PIF's Blue Pacific strategy under the South–South cooperation framework (Wang 2019). Afterwards, Sogavare pointedly expressed his appreciation for 'China's care and support for the development of Pacific Island countries', labelling it as a 'model of South-South cooperation' (Xinhua Net, 2019).

In October 2019, Solomon Islands signed up to the BRI during Prime Minister Sogavare's visit to China (Zhang, 2021). Sogavare described the BRI as bringing great opportunities for Solomon Islands in trade, investment, agriculture and fisheries, tourism, and other sectors (Xinhua 2019). But while Solomon Islands signed up to the BRI, it has not passively adopted BRI narratives. Instead, narratives about the BRI have been co-constructed by China and Solomon Islands, since they embody 'how the Pacific Islands intend to manage their interests on the regional geopolitical stage with many suitors' (Szadziewski, 2021, p. 307). Indeed, Sogavare has used the China relationship to access infrastructure development that could constitute valuable political capital for the 2024 national elections (Kabutaulaka, 2022). For example, Solomon Islands leveraged its membership of the BRI to access infrastructure

investment from the China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation (CCECC), which has engaged in six projects after the diplomatic switch: the Solomon Islands National University Panatina office and classroom complex; the National Stadium and Facilities for the 2023 Pacific Games; the Land and Maritime Connectivity Project; the Munda International Terminal in the Western Province; the Mongga Bridge in north-east Guadalcanal; the upgrade of the international port in Honiara; and the construction of two wharves in the Makira and Renbel provinces (Smith et al. 2023).

While the Solomon Islands government, and particularly Prime Minister Sogavare, have instrumentally used narratives about the switch to China to leverage competition between Solomon Islands' partners, they have also been intended to influence its domestic audience. There was significant domestic opposition to the Sogavare's government decision to switch diplomatic ties in 2019, with Malaita province, through its then premier Daniel Suidani, leading the fight. Suidani's dislike of China resulted in his provincial administration expelling all Chinese logging companies operating on Malaita (Waikori, 2020). Although this was justified based on these companies failing to pay licence fees, it had significant implications, as China was the largest buyer of raw logs in the forestry industry (Wilson 2022). Suidani also came up with his own 'foreign' policy following the government's diplomatic switch in 2019, called the 'Auki Communique', which sought a more assertive role for the province in managing its affairs, resources, and people in the light of the diplomatic switch (Sasako, 2023). However, Suidani lost office following a successful vote of no-confidence in the Malaita provincial assembly in February 2023, leading to claims that his removal was orchestrated by China (Paskal 2023). However, such interpretations overstated China's influence over the decision and underestimated the agency of Malaitans, particularly as most members of the national parliament from Malaita are members of the Sogavare government, indicating the complexities of provincial politics.

Samoa

During Minister Wang Yi's 2022 tour of the region, in late May he signed a bilateral agreement on behalf of China with Samoa (Government of Samoa, 2022). The agreement promised 'greater collaboration' between the two states, and while its terms have remained private, Samoan Prime Minister Fiamē Naomi Mata'afa commented that she and Wang Yi had discussed 'climate change, the pandemic, and peace and security' (quoted in Davidson 2022). A media release from the Samoan Government stated that China would continue to provide support for infrastructure development guided by a framework 'to be determined and mutually agreed' (Government of Samoa, 2022).

But this agreement was not necessarily a diplomatic 'win' for China. Only a week later, and less than two weeks after she had taken office following a change of government in the May 2022 election, in a move the Australian media characterised as a 'duel for influence', Australian Foreign Minister Penny

Wong visited Samoa (Davidson, 2022). During her visit, Wong announced an eight-year partnership between Australia and Samoa to help advance human development, and provide a new patrol boat for Samoa (Australian High Commission Independent State of Samoa 2022). If there was a diplomatic 'winner' from these two visits, it was Samoa.

This example highlights a dynamic that has long characterised Samoa's foreign policy: it is 'one of the most assertive and outspoken countries in the region. Donors in particular fall over themselves to laud the Samoan example' (Corbett 2017). This assertiveness has been aided by the fact that Samoa has been led by longstanding and highly experienced politicians, with former Prime Minister Tuilaepa Dr. Sailele Malielegaoi, who was also Foreign Minister, in office between 1998 and 2021. While current Prime Minister Fiamē, who is also Foreign Minister, only took over in 2021, she is a veteran politician, having been in Parliament since 1985, and Deputy Prime Minister under Tuilaepa's government for four years.

Samoa's assertiveness in its foreign affairs has meant that its leaders have not been persuaded to adopt China's historical/colonial narrative. This is partly because, while Samoa acknowledges its colonial past, it has strategically set out to redefine its own kingdom (*sāili malo*) removed from concepts of colonial oppression. While German, British, and American administrations shared control over the Samoan islands from 1889 to 1899 in a 'tridominium', 'Euro-American colonial strategy failed to exercise colonial power over Samoans' (Droessler 2017). The strong influence of Samoan leaders, the Fa'asamoa culture, customs, and traditions, and the uneven and incomplete nature of Euro-American colonial power, made the tridominium a weak colonial state. Indeed, Samoa has a record of negotiating political outcomes on its own terms. For example, the successful syncretism between Western principles and traditional customs and protocols in Samoa's political system is often quoted as a powerful symbols of the country's democratic achievements (Sio, 2018). In the spirit of *sāili malo*, Tuilaepa emphasised sovereignty when discussing Samoa's relations with China, observing in a 2018 interview that: 'the understanding between Samoa and China is that they respect our sovereignty and our independence for our own decision making' (Savali Newspaper 2018). Tuilaepa repeatedly emphasised sovereignty, for example, observing that: 'Samoa [seeks] China's support in areas that other traditional donors do not engage in, but Samoa considers as being vital to Samoa's development aspirations and nation building' (Government of Samoa 2015). Fiamē has continued emphasising sovereignty, but has been more assertive in her approach to China. For example, shortly after taking office, she cancelled a US$100 million BRI-funded port project out of concerns about Samoa's indebtedness to China (which was US$419.3 million out of total government debt of US$1 billion in December 2021) (Barnett 2021). And, while Fiamē signed the bilateral development agreement with China in May 2022, she led the regional push against China's efforts to pursue a broader regional security and development agreement, arguing that regional matters must instead be discussed at the PIF (Polu 2022).

As Fiamē observed: 'you cannot have a regional agreement when the region hasn't met to discuss it. And to be called to have that discussion and have an expectation that there would be a comprehensive decision or outcome was something that we could not agree to' (Wong 2022).

While Samoa has adopted the term 'developing country' in the context of its engagement with the United Nations, outside of that context it is reluctant to refer to itself in those terms. This was exemplified by Tuilaepa in a 2018 speech, in which he stated that: 'we [Pacific Island countries] are susceptible to being characterised as countries that have little, and that we should be grateful for whatever is offered to us…I see us increasingly empowered to reject this characterisation' (Malielegaoi 2018a). Samoa's rejection of this terminology has meant that China's efforts to use its strategic narrative of South–South cooperation have gained little traction in Samoa.

However, Tuilaepa did adopt some of China's language relating to its BRI. For example, after Samoa was the first PIC to sign onto the BRI, in a 2018 interview he said that: 'the Belt and Road Initiative is opening a vast market and bringing lots of opportunity for the world, particularly for the small countries like Samoa' (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Independent State of Samoa, 2018). This is not surprising, given that China's assistance to Samoa under the BRI, and its development program more broadly, includes infrastructure projects, sports, agriculture, education, and health. However, as noted, Fiamē has sought to distance her government from Chinese lending and the BRI. While Tuilaepa spoke warmly about China's BRI, this did not necessarily mean that he and his government had been persuaded by China's worldview. Indeed, while Samoa signed on to the BRI, Tuilaepa was one of the primary advocates for a counter-narrative developed by the PIF, that of the 'Blue Pacific'.

Tuilaepa was the first Pacific leader to use that narrative during a speech at the United Nations in 2017, in which he explained that it sought to 're-capture the collective potential of our shared stewardship of the Pacific Ocean based on an explicit recognition of our shared "ocean identity", "ocean geography", and "ocean resources". It aims to strengthen collective action as one "Blue Pacific continent"' (quoted in PIF, 2017a). Samoa hosted the PIF leaders' meeting that year, which endorsed the Blue Pacific narrative as the region's long-term foreign policy commitment (PIF, 2017b). Importantly, Tuilaepa and other Pacific leaders, particularly former PIF Secretary General Dame Meg Taylor, have used the Blue Pacific narrative to push back against encroachment by China and other powers (Chapter 6). For example, during a 2018 speech, Tuilaepa observed that 'under the flagship of our Blue Pacific identity, we are building a collective voice amidst the geopolitical din', as the Blue Pacific narrative 'represents our recognition that as a region, we are large, connected and strategically important' (Malielegaoi 2018a). With this in mind, in a later speech, he cautioned the region's partners by observing that: 'Genuine, durable, and transparent partnerships are very important to our region. Partnerships that respect the integrity and sovereignty of our members

to decide freely on who their partners are and whose contribution is provided on a non-interventionist basis' (Malielegaoi 2018b).

Fiamē has continued to adopt the Blue Pacific narrative, particularly to emphasise the importance of Pacific regionalism, observing that Samoa sees the Blue Pacific as a 'powerful political bloc and a viable sustainable region' (Mata'afa, 2021). As described in Chapter 6, Tuilaepa and other Pacific leaders have also used the Blue Pacific narrative to seek to influence partner states, including China, to take seriously the region's security priorities, particularly climate change. For example, Tuilaepa stated that: 'Under the Blue Pacific identity, we are asserting our common values and concerns, and building our collective voice amid the geopolitical din on the existential threat of climate change that looms for all of our Pacific family' (Malielegaoi 2018b). This highlights how PICs are not passive targets of attempts to use strategic narratives to influence them, but can instead deploy narratives of their own to both resist attempts at influence and to seek to influence the influence seeker. Therefore, Samoan leaders have not adopted China's narratives, preferring instead to promote the alternative Blue Pacific narrative to emphasise Samoa's sovereignty, equality with its partners, and the importance of Pacific regionalism.

Conclusion

While many PICs have been receptive to China's growing interest, particularly its infrastructure lending and investment, they have been less receptive to its narratives, and China has therefore not succeeded in re-ordering the region to alter PICs' perceptions and agendas. As we have shown, the leaders of three key PICs have selectively adopted China's narratives when justifying their foreign policies to advance their own interests, rather than those of China. Fiji has arguably been the most enthusiastic adopter of the historical/colonial and South–South cooperation narratives, with Prime Minister Bainimarama, who lost office in December 2022, instrumentalising these narratives to push back against efforts by the US, Australia, and New Zealand to isolate his regime following the 2006 coup. Any benefits for China from Bainimarama's use of these narratives, in terms of placing pressure on traditional metropolitan powers, were incidental. Solomon Islands leaders have also instrumentally drawn on China's narratives, with Prime Minister Sogavare deploying historical/colonial and South–South cooperation narratives to send messages to Solomon Islands' traditional metropolitan powers and to leverage greater support from both them and China. Again, Sogavare's use of these narratives, and indeed his government's decision to switch diplomatic recognition to China, was primarily to advance the Solomon Islands government's interests, with any benefits to China again incidental. Samoa has also selectively drawn on China's narratives, particularly relating to the BRI, but has been more reluctant to engage with historical/colonial and South–South cooperation narratives, as they do not resonate with its master narratives about its identity and historical experience. While a casual reading of the discourse of Fiji, Solomon Islands, and Samoa's

leaders might suggest that they have adopted some of China's narratives, a deeper reading reveals that this has been done selectively and instrumentally to advance their interests, rather than China's.

Therefore, our analysis demonstrates the value of attempting to examine the reception of strategic narratives, which, in turn, highlights the risk of over-interpreting their impact. As our analysis shows, China's narratives have not been adopted wholesale by PICs, nor have they necessarily influenced how those countries have behaved. Instead, those narratives have been instrumentalised by PICs, revealing the importance of accounting for the agency of the audience of strategic narratives. Our analysis also illustrates the importance of contextual and cultural analysis of the receptivity of narratives. Importantly, our analysis of Fiji, Solomon Islands, and Samoa's official discourse has been conducted by nationals of those countries, who have the linguistic and cultural skills necessary to understand and interpret how narratives are being articulated, for what meaning, and with what intent.

While our analysis suggests that narrative power is more limited than it is often assumed, it does suggest that the audiences most influenced by strategic narratives might not be the direct targets of those narratives. Indeed, China's narratives in the Pacific Islands region, as well as their instrumental adoption by PICs, have motivated changes in the policies and narratives of metropolitan powers. As noted, in response, the US, Australia, New Zealand, and other metropolitan powers have each articulated counter-narratives and increased their expenditure of material resources. Therefore, while scepticism has been expressed about China's narratives being 'slogans' (Zeng, 2020, pp. 1–2) or 'cheap talk' (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Zeng, 2020, p. 9), they do seem to generate effects – and because talk is cheap, they might be a very cost-effective tool of indirect influence.

Notes

1 This chapter is excerpted from: Joanne Wallis, Geyi Xie, William Waqavakatoga, Priestley Habru, and Maima Koro, 'Ordering the Islands? Pacific Responses to China's Strategic Narratives', *Chinese Journal of International Politics* (2023) 16(4): 457–481.

2 NPR reporter Ashley Waterman's interview with Robson Tana Djokovic, Chief of Staff, Office of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (OPMC) and Dr Samson Viulu, Policy Secretary for Productive Sector, Policy Implementation Monitoring and Evaluation Unit (PIMEU), OPMC, Honiara, Solomon Islands, which one of the authors facilitated in November 2019.

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