

Oceanic hydro-politics:  
Exploring contemporary  
geopolitics of the  
Blue Pacific  
*Wesley Morgan*

**REGIONAL OUTLOOK**

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*Griffith Asia Institute*

# Griffith Asia Institute



## Regional Outlook

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# Introduction

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This paper explores the contemporary geopolitics of the Pacific Ocean, with a focus on the 14 independent Pacific island states that lie to the north and east of Australia. Often portrayed as small, isolated and vulnerable, Pacific island states have over the past 50 years asserted an alternative narrative of their place in the world. Drawing on cultural and economic connections with the ocean from pre-colonial times they have succeeded in gaining recognition under the UN Law of the Sea as large ocean states (rather than small island states), with sovereign rights over a large swathe of the earth's surface. Further, drawing on pre-colonial relationships that stretch across the ocean, they have asserted a contemporary regional identity as a 'maritime continent'. Since 2017, island leaders have expressed a willingness to work together as a *Blue Pacific* continent to pursue common interests, particularly in the face of shared challenges such as climate change and increasing geostrategic rivalry in their ocean. Delivering the 2019 Griffith Asia Lecture, the secretary general of the Pacific Islands Forum, Dame Meg Taylor explained that the *Blue Pacific* formulation represents 'recognition that as a region, we are large, connected and strategically important'. This paper contextualises the *Blue Pacific* as the latest iteration of a history of active and successful indigenous Pacific regionalism.

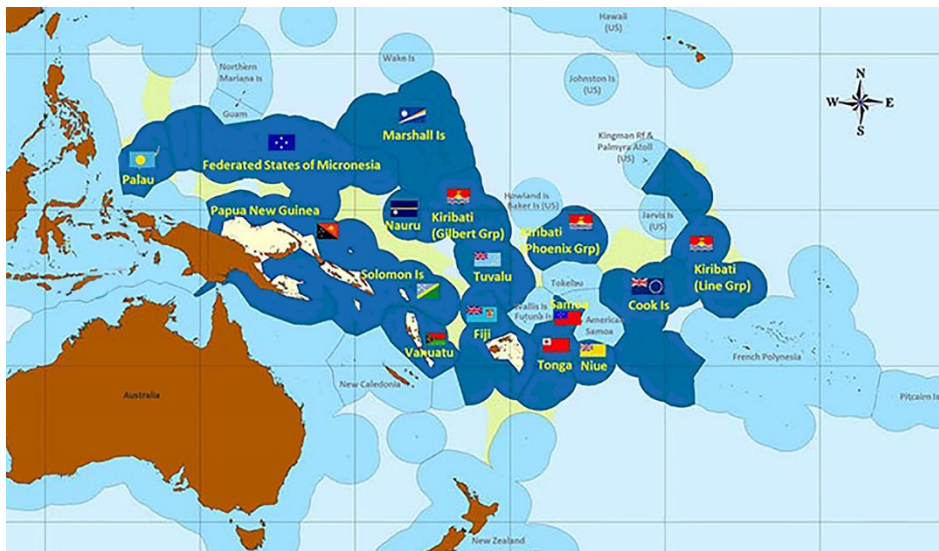
Australia—the largest aid donor to Pacific island countries and a key security partner—has recently renewed engagement with Pacific island states. In late 2018, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison announced a 'Pacific step up' and established a new Office for the Pacific. The Pacific step up appears to be driven by a security focus, especially the concern that China hopes to establish a naval base in the Pacific islands. Canberra is looking to shore up influence in what it regards as its sphere of influence, and to more closely integrate Pacific island states into Australian economic and security institutions. This paper argues that Australian policymakers need to look past commonly held preconceptions of Pacific island states and engage more closely with the guiding ideas that underpin the collective diplomacy of the *Blue Pacific*. Most pointedly, Australian officials will need to grapple with climate change as a serious security threat or, at a minimum, appreciate that Pacific island states understand climate change as a first order strategic issue. Failure to do so will likely undercut Australia's own ambitions in the region.

This paper is in four parts. Part one explores the *Blue Pacific*, explaining that contemporary regionalism in the Pacific draws from a well-established pan-oceanic identity to negotiate shared challenges. Part two considers the ways that the Pacific Ocean itself is changing in response to a warming climate, with devastating consequences for the security of Pacific island states. It also details the Pacific's collective diplomacy on climate change. Part three explores the return of geostrategic competition to the Pacific Ocean—as a rising China begins to challenge US sea-power in the western Pacific—and evaluates the response of Pacific island states. The fourth and final section explores Australia's place in relation to the *Blue Pacific* and considers tensions between Australia's strategy of regional integration and the collective diplomacy of Pacific island states.

# 1. Locating the Blue Pacific: Indigenous regionalism in the world's largest ocean

To Australia's north and east lies a vast maritime continent comprised of 14 independent nation states. As one of the most culturally and linguistically diverse regions on earth it contains hundreds of societies spread across an area of ocean larger than continental Africa. In recent times Pacific island leaders have recast this region as the *Blue Pacific*. At the 2017 annual Pacific Islands Forum meeting, island leaders endorsed a '*Blue Pacific* strategy that calls for inspired leadership and a long-term foreign policy commitment to act as one Blue Continent'.<sup>1</sup> In 2019, Pacific Islands Forum leaders agreed to develop a shared '2050 Strategy for the *Blue Pacific* Continent'.<sup>2</sup>

Figure 1: The *Blue Pacific* continent—Exclusive Economic Zones of 14 independent Pacific island countries



Source: Adapted from *Secretariat of the Pacific Community* (2014).

Understanding the political significance of contemporary articulations of the *Blue Pacific* requires an appreciation of Pacific cultural connections to the ocean, and of the ways those connections contrast with a bias toward the terrestrial in other parts of the world. In the Western cultural imagination, the ocean tends to be conceived as a blue 'void'—an unpeopled and lawless space between the terrestrial spaces that *really matter*.<sup>3</sup> Indeed norms of international law, originating in Europe and developed over centuries, hold that nation states have exclusive sovereignty tied to defined areas *on land*, and/or in waters immediately adjacent to land masses. In this rendering, the open ocean is imagined as a form of *aqua nullius*: a space across which navies might roam, and merchant ships might travel unhindered, and over which no-one holds exclusive control. By contrast, Pacific islanders have a different conception of their place in the world, one defined by enduring cultural, economic and political connections with and across the ocean. The late Tongan philosopher Epeli Hau'ofa describes Pacific islanders as amongst the 'proportion of Earth's total human population who can be truly referred to as Oceanic Peoples', having developed a shared pan-oceanic cultural heritage based on centuries of isolation from continental cultures.<sup>4</sup> He suggests that while 'continental men' have tended to see only

'small islands in a far sea', Pacific peoples in fact live in a vast, interconnected, 'sea of islands'.<sup>5</sup> It was no doubt this 'sea of islands' that Samoan Prime Minister Tuilaepa Sailele Malielegaoi had in mind when he introduced the *Blue Pacific* formulation at the United Nations in New York in 2017. He explained:

*The Pacific Ocean has provided our island communities their cultural and historical identity since time immemorial. It has been the major influence in the history of Pacific Island communities. Throughout the region, customary association with the sea forms the basis of present-day social structures, livelihoods and tenure systems and traditional systems of stewardship governing its use. Pacific leaders urge the world to recognise the inseparable link between our ocean, seas and Pacific island peoples: their values, traditional practices and spiritual connection.*<sup>6</sup>

Recent articulations of the *Blue Pacific* draw from a well-spring of literature and art in the Pacific that has, in the decades since independence, revived pre-colonial culture and custom and emphasised pan-Pacific identities.<sup>7</sup> Since the 1970s in particular, key works by Pacific islander poets, novelists, musicians, visual artists, choreographers and dancers have sought to 'destabilise myths of island isolation' and to assert a 'transoceanic imaginary' rooted in ocean voyaging and maritime kinship connections.<sup>8</sup> Seminal texts in this tradition include the 1976 essay 'Towards a New Oceania', by Samoan poet and novelist Albert Wendt<sup>9</sup>, the essays 'Our Sea of Islands' (1993) and 'the Ocean in Us' (1998) by Epli Hau'ofa<sup>10</sup>, and writings by poet and academic Teresia Teaiwa, who explained: 'we sweat and cry salt water, so we know the ocean is really in our blood'.<sup>11</sup> More recent works include those of Katerina Teaiwa, Cresantia Koya and Karin Amimoto-Ingersoll.<sup>12</sup> This cultural production—artistic, literary and academic—has deeply influenced political forms of regionalism. As political scientist Greg Fry explains, the influential essays of Wendt and Hau'ofa especially, provide inspiration for regional cooperation guided by 'the unifying links of the past—the epic ocean voyages, the exchange relationships and the unifying Pacific Ocean'.<sup>13</sup>

A Pacific cultural renaissance in the decades following independence emphasised indigenous agency and technology. Ocean-going sailing canoes, for example, became a common motif and a powerful metaphor for cultural sovereignty across the world's largest ocean. Of course, ocean-going canoes, like the *vaka* of Polynesia and the *drua* of Fiji, are not simply metaphors. Prior to the colonial era these vessels *were* key to political power over maritime domains. Indeed, European sailors were surprised by the sailing technology of Pacific islanders and marvelled at Pacific ships built without metal, which carried hundreds, and were faster and more easily manoeuvred than their own.<sup>14</sup> Famed British navigator James Cook admired the navigational abilities of Polynesians, and characterised Polynesian society as comprising 'by far the most extensive nation on earth'.<sup>15</sup> During the era of missionaries and colonial administrations however, these connections across the ocean became more limited as inter-island travel was discouraged, or banned outright.<sup>16</sup> In the decades following the Second World War, political leaders reclaimed their status as custodians of a maritime continent.<sup>17</sup> Fiji's first prime minister Ratu Kamisese Mara, for example, argued connections severed by colonialism needed to be reforged, and that Pacific regionalism ought to be guided by the norms and sensibilities of a 'Pacific Way'.<sup>18</sup> This central idea proved a guiding light for Pacific collective diplomacy in the latter part of the twentieth century, on issues like decolonisation and shared ocean management.<sup>19</sup> Faced with new pressures in the twenty-first century, including growing geostrategic competition and the impacts of climate change, Pacific island leaders are again asserting shared stewardship of a *Blue Pacific* continent.

Pacific regionalism has tended to be deployed as a means of negotiating impinging global forces—of asserting a uniquely *Pacific* identity to manage the dynamic interaction between autonomous states and pressures to conform to globalising ideas about trade,

economics, governance and security. As Greg Fry explains, Pacific island societies have deployed a regional identity 'as a shield against global forces'.<sup>20</sup> Regionalism has been embraced by island leaders, not as a means to achieve market efficiencies or to pursue deeper integration, as per the model of regionalism in Europe, but rather to achieve political ends. Thus, Pacific regionalism has served as an 'arena for negotiating globalisation, as a source of regional governance through agreed norms, as a regional political community, and as a diplomatic bloc'.<sup>21</sup> Today, the secretary general of the Pacific Islands Forum, Dame Meg Taylor, argues the *Blue Pacific* draws from 'a rich history of thinking about the possibilities of an Oceania continent'. In a 2018 speech delivered in Canberra she explained:

*In essence all of these appeals to Oceania, of who we are, respond to an awareness of the missed potential of our ocean continent, or as [Epeli] Hau'ofa describes it, the way the hoped-for era of autonomy following political independence has not materialised. In response they all seek to reframe the region away from the enduring narrative of small, isolated and fragile islands, to a narrative of a large, connected and strategically important ocean continent.*<sup>22</sup>

The Pacific Islands Forum, a key site of Pacific diplomacy, was itself founded as a means of gaining greater control of the regional diplomatic agenda. Originally called the South Pacific Forum, it was formed in response to limitations at the South Pacific Commission (SPC), a regional institution established in the aftermath of WWII to foster regional cooperation *between colonial powers*. Pacific islanders had no decision-making powers within SPC and pressing political matters, such as decolonisation and nuclear weapons testing, were excluded from the Commission's remit. This constraint proved a primary motivation for establishing the South Pacific Forum.<sup>23</sup>

From the outset, the Forum helped Pacific island states secure sovereign rights over ocean spaces.<sup>24</sup> At the first Forum meet, island leaders declared their unique connection to the ocean 'merited special consideration in the recognition of territorial claims' during Law of the Sea negotiations at the UN.<sup>25</sup> During those UN negotiations, island states diverged from land-centred, legal norms to assert identities as countries 'of water interspersed with islands' and to 'claim jurisdiction over a block of ocean, far from any continent'.<sup>26</sup> Working with other coastal states in the developing world (and despite opposition from naval powers like the United States and Britain), Pacific island countries secured recognition of large Exclusive Economic Zones in the 1982 UN Law of the Sea. This meant that island states suddenly became *large ocean states* and gained control of significant marine resources, including one of the world's largest tuna fishery and valuable reserves of seabed minerals. Today the collective Exclusive Economic Zone of Pacific island states comprises around 20 per cent of the world's ocean that is under national jurisdiction.<sup>27</sup> Over the decades since UNCLOS was negotiated, island states have looked to strengthen their maritime sovereignty and derive greater economic returns from marine resources. The Pacific is the source of more than 60 per cent of the world's tuna catch, and the region's fishery is worth \$US5.8billion.<sup>28</sup> However, most of this tuna is caught by the fishing fleets of distant nations. In recent times, island states have developed joint management strategies, and have coordinated access conditions across national jurisdictions, dramatically improving returns. Today, fishing access fees provide between 10–60 per cent of all government revenue for six Pacific nations.<sup>29</sup>

Working together through the auspices of the *Blue Pacific*, Pacific island states continue to shape global cooperation on ocean management. Through collective diplomacy at the UN for example, Pacific island states successfully championed an ocean goal as part of the UN's 2030 *Sustainable Development Goals*, arguing that, absent a stand-alone ocean goal, there would be a terrestrial bias in the UN's vision for sustainable development.<sup>30</sup> Subsequently, Fiji co-hosted the inaugural United Nations Ocean Conference in 2017, and Fiji's ambassador to the UN, Peter Thomson, was appointed UN Special Envoy for the



Ocean. Today, Pacific island states are active in simultaneous UN negotiations to develop a new management regime for the high seas,<sup>31</sup> and to govern seabed mining in international waters.<sup>32</sup> At the UN, island states have developed regional positions through the auspices of the Pacific Small Island Developing States (P-SIDS) grouping, a coalition of Pacific ambassadors, most based in New York, that notably does not include representatives from Australia or New Zealand.<sup>33</sup> Coordination has also been improved through the establishment (in 2010) of a new 'Pacific Ocean Commissioner'.<sup>34</sup>

Finally, Pacific leaders are working together to secure the outer boundaries of the *Blue Pacific* continent in the face of global warming. Island governments hope to make 'permanent' the outer edges of their maritime Exclusive Economic Zones, using fixed coordinates to demarcate those boundaries rather than coastal features of the islands themselves, which are likely to shrink as sea-levels rise and coastal features become inundated.<sup>35</sup> As Pacific Islands Forum Secretary General, and Pacific Ocean Commissioner, Dame Meg Taylor told Australian media in 2018: 'island leaders are taking very seriously the demarcation of the maritime boundaries and are making sure all EEZs are finalised'.<sup>36</sup> She explained:

*Look, right back in the early days, before the formation of the South Pacific Commission, in the [19]40's, there was an articulation about the 'seventh continent'. Just because it is water, doesn't mean it doesn't have legal boundaries, if we can secure them.*<sup>37</sup>

## 2. A warming ocean: Pacific security in the Anthropocene

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In the twenty-first century the ocean itself, so long a source of sustenance and shared identity, has become an unprecedented threat for the *Blue Pacific*. As emitted carbon from the burning of fossil fuels continues to accumulate in the Earth's atmosphere it traps heat, and in recent decades more than 90 per cent of this excess heat has been absorbed by the world's oceans, especially, as it turns out, by the Pacific Ocean.<sup>38</sup> The Pacific is a dizzyingly vast ocean, by far the world's largest and deepest. Encompassing almost a third of the globe, it has been described as the world's 'dominant entity' and it regulates weather the world over.<sup>39</sup> Now, as the Pacific warms, hotter surface temperatures are spawning immensely destructive cyclones and more extreme climactic events, like the *El Niño* phenomenon, which in turn are changing rainfall patterns and undermining food crops. Coral reefs—the 'rainforests of the sea' which have been a key source of fish for Pacific islanders for countless generations—are bleaching bone white. Even in the most optimistic projections, in which temperature rise is limited to 1.5 degrees above the long-term average, 90 per cent of these reefs will not survive repeated bleaching events. In the more realistic scenarios, with warming of more than 2 degrees, more than 99 per cent will be gone in coming decades.<sup>40</sup> For Pacific atoll nations—those which are comprised of reef and sand and rise only meters above the waves—the warming ocean presents a greater threat still. People who have thrived as independent societies for thousands of years and have become sovereign nation-states in the contemporary world, face a challenge to their very existence as sea levels rise, flooding their drinking water and steadily undermining the territorial integrity and habitability of their island homes.<sup>41</sup>

Pacific island countries have for decades implored the international community to understand climate change as a critical threat to their security. Nearly 30 years ago, at the 1991 South Pacific Forum, leaders agreed that 'global warming and sea-level rise were the most serious environmental threats' and that 'the cultural, economic and physical survival of Pacific nations is at great risk'.<sup>42</sup> Over the decades since, Pacific island states have lobbied the UN Security Council to understand climate change as a threat to the security of nations; one that ought to be considered a matter of 'high politics' in international affairs, akin to matters of war and peace. This lobbying has met with some success, with the UN Security Council first focusing on the security implications of climate change in 2007 and debating the issue on numerous occasions since then.<sup>43</sup> During these debates, some states have argued climate change is not the purview of the Security Council, which bears primary responsibility under the UN Charter 'for the maintenance of international peace and security'. But island states remain adamant. As the Marshall Islands Foreign Minister Tony de Brum explained when he addressed the Security Council, 'in whose warped world is the potential loss of a country not a threat to international peace and security?'.<sup>44</sup> In 2011 there was some limited recognition of climate change as a security threat to island states when the Security Council issued a statement which 'expressed concern that possible security implications of loss of territory of some States caused by sea-level-rise may arise, in particular in small low-lying island States'.<sup>45</sup> In 2015, the Security Council held a special discussion (convened by New Zealand) which considered 'security challenges facing small island developing states'. That discussion heard a joint declaration from Pacific leaders that '*climate change and its adverse impacts are a threat to the territorial integrity, security and sovereignty and in some cases to the very existence of our islands*'.<sup>46</sup> As a bloc, Pacific island states continue to lobby for the UN Security Council to appoint a special rapporteur on the security threats posed by climate change.

In 2018, leaders from the Pacific Islands Forum issued a regional security declaration which reaffirmed climate change posed ‘the single greatest threat to the livelihoods, security and wellbeing of the peoples of the Pacific’. This explicit recognition, in a regional *security* declaration signed by Australia and New Zealand as well as island states, presents a conceptual challenge for strategic thinkers in Australia. Being accustomed to considering security threats of a certain kind—hard power conflict, wars between states, threats at the border—Australia’s national security community struggles to appreciate the profound threats posed by a changing climate. Even where climate change is understood as a serious concern, it tends to be understood as a key driver, or force multiplier, of more traditional threats. When for example, the head of the Australian Defence Force Angus Campbell raised concerns in mid-2019 he warned ‘China could take advantage of climate change to occupy abandoned islands in the Pacific’.<sup>47</sup> Likewise, his predecessor, former Defence Chief Chris Barrie, argued that the possibility of mass migration driven by climate change presents a ‘direct threat’ to Australia’s national security.<sup>48</sup> However the *most direct* threats are those of climate change itself (not secondary phenomena like mass-migration or the exacerbation of state competition). For Australia these include more intense and fatal bushfires, drought and water shortages, stronger cyclones, flooding, and coastal inundation. In a world headed toward four degrees of warming this century, the continued habitability of parts of the continent is in doubt.

Pacific island leaders have long understood multilateral diplomacy is required to effectively tackle climate change. In 1991, Pacific island leaders stressed the urgency of securing a global convention that would entail ‘significant and immediate reductions in emissions of industrially generated greenhouse gases’.<sup>49</sup> Pacific island countries—along with other countries in the Caribbean, and the Indian and Atlantic Oceans—formed an ‘Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS)’ to lobby for a global response to climate change.<sup>50</sup> The Alliance came to comprise 44 countries, around 20 per cent of the UN’s total membership. Through determined diplomacy, Pacific island states have disproportionately shaped climate talks at the UN.<sup>51</sup> In 1994 for example, Nauru’s UN ambassador Marlene Moses, acting as chair of AOSIS, drafted the first proposal for the Kyoto Protocol.<sup>52</sup> Subsequently Pacific island diplomacy was also crucial for the 2015 Paris Agreement. When he met with Pacific leaders in Hawaii in late 2016, US President Barack Obama acknowledged that ‘we could not have gotten a Paris Agreement without the incredible efforts and hard work of the island nations’.<sup>53</sup>

### 3. A contested space: The return of geostrategic competition in the Pacific Ocean

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During the pre-colonial era, the Pacific was shaped by the economic and political agendas of Pacific islanders themselves, as they voyaged and traded, and pursued diplomacy and warfare too. However, from the moment European vessels poked their bow into the Pacific Ocean, the region has been subject to contests for control by other powers. After Vasco Nunez de Balboa somewhat improbably claimed the whole of the Pacific Ocean and adjoining lands for Spain in 1513, the Spanish considered the Pacific a *mare clausum* (literally a closed sea) and periodically patrolled the Magellan Straits to keep other European vessels from the region.<sup>54</sup> Over five centuries since, naval competition between major powers—including Spain, Britain, France, Holland, Germany, the United States, Japan and China—has influenced political life in the Pacific. For the past 70 years, the overarching balance of power has been a settled matter. Having defeated Japan in a series of naval battles at the end of the Second World War, and taken control of islands across the western Pacific, strategic planners in Washington viewed the whole of the Pacific Ocean, from California to mainland Asia, as a maritime domain shaped by American power. In 1949, US General Douglas MacArthur declared the Pacific Ocean had become an ‘American lake’.<sup>55</sup> In the aftermath of the war the US established a series of fortified bases in the north and west Pacific Ocean, and maintained an unrivalled mobile force in the region (both vessels and aircraft) that was seen as the ‘best means to guarantee US security interests vis-à-vis East Asia’.<sup>56</sup> Today, the distribution of power across the Pacific is beginning to shift, driven especially by China’s rapid economic growth and investment in military technologies and naval capabilities. The Australian treasury estimates that in ten years’ time China’s economy will be nearly twice that of the US, at \$US42.4 trillion and US\$24 trillion respectively.<sup>57</sup> With increased economic clout, China has launched an ambitious multi-trillion-dollar Belt and Road Initiative, which entails massive investment in infrastructure (ports, roads, railways and energy) and reaches into the Pacific Ocean as part of a ‘twenty-first century Maritime Silk Road’. China is also modernising its navy, and developing an ocean-going, blue water fleet.<sup>58</sup>

A more powerful China sees the Pacific Ocean once again understood primarily as a contested maritime space (at least by security analysts in Washington, Canberra and Tokyo), and a renewed emphasis on sea-power is again shaping international affairs in the region. At issue are certain ‘brute facts’ that have unsettled the maritime security order—particularly China’s investment in so-called ‘Anti-Access Area Denial’ (A2AD) capabilities, such as anti-ship missiles and radar tracking stations which ‘make it difficult for the US and its allies to operate close to China’.<sup>59</sup> China has also built artificial islands on disputed reefs and shoals in the South China Sea and fortified some of them with anti-ship cruise missiles, surface to air missiles, and equipment designed to jam military communications.<sup>60</sup> Taken together these developments have undermined America’s ability to project power into parts of Asia, with implications for US security guarantees as well.<sup>61</sup> The US has responded by signalling that it intends to remain a Pacific power, and by ‘rebalancing’ some of its forces from elsewhere in the world.<sup>62</sup> The US National Defense Strategy (2018) describes China as a revisionist power and a strategic competitor; one that seeks ‘regional hegemony’ in the near term and ‘displacement of the US to achieve global pre-eminence in the future’.<sup>63</sup> The US has increased investment in expensive capabilities intended to disrupt China’s maritime denial strategy, such as stealth bombers based in places like Guam. In 2019, the US formally withdrew from a Cold War-era arms control treaty and resumed testing once-banned intermediate range ballistic missiles. It also announced it was consulting allies in Asia to deploy ground-based missiles which would be in striking range of mainland China. The US has adopted a more distributed and flexible force

posture in the western Pacific, with new troop rotations established in Darwin and in the Philippines.<sup>64</sup> New assets have been deployed to Palau, Micronesia, Marshall Islands, Wake Islands and Johnston Atoll. The US is also partnering with Australia to develop a new naval base at Manus Island (in Papua New Guinea).

The United States' pivot to the Pacific Ocean has evolved into a broader strategy that also encompasses the Indian Ocean, and Pacific island countries are now finding themselves reframed as a subset of a larger Indo-Pacific region. Driven by hard-headed assessments of the limits of unilateral sea-power (at least in the western Pacific) the US has embraced an offshore balancing strategy that sees the US work with maritime democracies in the Pacific and Indian Oceans to circumscribe China's rise, to shore up influence across the broader region, and to renew commitment to existing rules and norms of regional order. The US 'Pacific Command', based in Hawaii was in 2018 renamed the 'Indo-Pacific Command'. Washington also unveiled a strategy for a 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific', entailing greater quadrilateral cooperation between the US, Japan, Australia and India. The US and its allies have also announced joint initiatives intended to provide infrastructure financing alternatives to China's Belt and Road. Rather than competing with China in terms of scale they have sought to emphasise project quality and governance. There is no doubt these developments are reshaping international relations in the Pacific islands. In late 2018 for example, when Papua New Guinea hosted the annual Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit, China's president Xi Jinping met island leaders in Port Moresby to announce several Pacific island states had joined the Belt and Road Initiative. At the same summit the US, Japan, Australia and New Zealand announced a joint project to roll out electricity to 70 per cent of the PNG population within ten years (an ambitious goal, as only 13 per cent of the country had reliable electricity).<sup>65</sup> The day before the APEC summit—in a signal to both the US and China—Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison announced a major step up in Australia's engagement with Pacific island countries, accompanied by a new multi-billion dollar bilateral infrastructure financing facility for the Pacific (see further in section 4 of this paper).

Figure 2: The 'Indo-Pacific'



Source: Adapted from US Congressional Research Service (2018).

For centuries Pacific island societies have been influenced and remade by maritime contest, and by rivalry between colonial powers active in their ocean. It is a dynamic that stretches from Magellan to Xi Jinping. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the Pacific was considered a 'Spanish lake', as Spanish galleons plied waters between the Americas and the Philippines, and colonies were established in Guam, Palau and parts of Micronesia (and unsuccessfully attempted in south Pacific islands that still bear Spanish

names, like the Solomon Islands). From the late eighteenth century, the French and British vied for Pacific naval supremacy and were later joined by a German and American presence. In the latter part of the nineteenth century, in a process that reflected the relative strength of competing naval-powers, Pacific islands were variously annexed as French, British, German, Dutch and American territories. In the twentieth century, the Japanese navy seized German-administered islands during the First World War and lost them to the United States in the Second World War. Even after decolonisation, from the mid-1960s, the international relations of Pacific island states were marked by maritime rivalry between the US and the Soviet Union, and nuclear competition between the superpowers proved a defining issue of regional geopolitics in the latter half of the twentieth century.

Today's geostrategic contest in the Pacific—fundamentally a sea-power competition between the US and China—is not a new phenomenon. However, island leaders tend to be uncomfortable with their ocean once again being framed as a 'theatre' or 'basin' for great power rivalry. These depictions relegate Pacific island states to the status of potential bases or stationary aircraft carriers—essentially 'pawns in a power play-off by larger states'.<sup>66</sup> Island leaders are also concerned that their unique interests, and the distinct norms and guiding ideas of Pacific regionalism, should not be eroded in broader framings of the region<sup>67</sup>, such as the geopolitical construct of the 'Indo-Pacific', which frames the Pacific and Indian Oceans as a single 'strategic system'.<sup>68</sup> Island countries have responded to renewed geostrategic competition in the Pacific Ocean by reasserting their collective identity as a self-determined *Blue Pacific* maritime continent. Secretary General of the Pacific Islands Forum, Dame Meg Taylor, suggests renewed competition in the Pacific Ocean presents both opportunities and threats, and could see island states 'exercising stronger strategic autonomy'.<sup>69</sup> Pacific island states have also looked to leverage renewed great power engagement to focus on security concerns of their own, particularly those relating to climate change. The implications of differing threat perceptions in the Pacific Ocean are considered further in the final section of this paper, which explores Australia's relationship with the *Blue Pacific*.

## 4. The inside outsider: Australia's ambiguous relationship with the *Blue Pacific*

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Australia is formally a part of many Pacific regional processes and is the largest and most powerful member of the Pacific Islands Forum. But as Greg Fry suggests, neither Australia or New Zealand are 'emotionally' part of the *Blue Pacific*, 'though they claim to be leaders of the regional community'.<sup>70</sup> With its Polynesian heritage, New Zealand has a greater claim to cultural connection to pan-Pacific regional identity, but Pacific island leaders tend to associate Wellington closely with Canberra. The region's two developed nations are frequently described as 'big brothers' to island countries, part of the Pacific family by geography, but set apart by wealth and national identity. Perennially concerned that a major power with interests inimical to Australia's own might establish a presence in the Pacific, Australian interest in the region is above all driven by a strategic imperative to maintain political influence, and to deny the islands to other powers.<sup>71</sup> As a dependent ally of the United States, Canberra also looks to reassure Washington that it takes responsibility for management of security in the Pacific Ocean, particularly in the south west Pacific.<sup>72</sup> This has the dual effect of assuring Washington that Australia takes its alliance responsibilities seriously, while also highlighting US interests in the region, as Canberra looks to anchor an ongoing American military presence. Viewed through the prism of strategic considerations, Australian policymakers and analysts tend to see Pacific island states as part of Australia's 'backyard', and the south west Pacific in particular as Australia's sphere of influence. This results in a curious state of affairs: Australia views its own position as one of regional leadership (in the broader context of the US alliance), even when its identity as a Pacific nation is ambiguous. Australians themselves are not sure if the country is part of the Pacific. A 2010 poll from the Lowy Institute, found that just 31 per cent of Australians thought the country was part of the Pacific.<sup>73</sup> In addition, as Jonathon Schultz has persuasively argued, Australia's engagement with the Pacific tends to be episodic, driven by occasional crises that are understood to require Australian intervention. Thus, while Australia understands itself as 'overseeing' the Pacific islands, it also tends to 'overlook' the region.<sup>74</sup> In a related argument, Joanne Wallis suggests Australia is something of a 'hollow hegemon' in the Pacific: while it may feel it has a right to lead, there are clear limits to its ability to actually exercise influence.<sup>75</sup>

Despite inconsistent political engagement, Canberra's relations with Pacific island countries are generally warm, underpinned as they are by shared interests and a broad commitment to liberal democracy. In one crucial area however, there is radical divergence. As a major energy supplier, Australian policymakers have linked national interests to exports of coal and other fossil fuels, particularly to a growing Asia.<sup>76</sup> These calculations have guided Australia's approach to climate talks at the UN, where Australia sits opposite island states at the negotiating table.<sup>77</sup> Increasingly, Pacific island states are prepared to call out Canberra's recalcitrance on climate change, and do so in the context of regional cooperation in the *Blue Pacific*.<sup>78</sup> This lobbying has met with some success. At the 2018 Pacific Islands Forum for example, Australia affirmed climate change is the 'single greatest threat' to the region (though Australia was the only Forum member *not* to endorse a call for the United States to return to the Paris Agreement).<sup>79</sup> At the 2019 Forum, held in Tuvalu—an acrimonious affair marked by differences over climate change— island states also extracted a commitment that Australia would produce a long term low emissions strategy by 2020. Dame Meg Taylor hailed the outcome as a 'signal of Pacific strength'.<sup>80</sup> Vanuatu will host the Pacific Islands Forum in 2020, and expectations are high that Australia will bring to the meeting new commitments to tackle climate change.<sup>81</sup>

Australia's recent step up in engagement with Pacific island states is driven by perceived security threats, particularly a concern that China could leverage infrastructure lending to establish a military base in the region. The Pacific step up is intended to cement political relations and to limit Chinese influence in the region. It has entailed unprecedented political engagement with Pacific island countries. During 2019 for example, Australian prime minister Scott Morrison made bilateral visits to Fiji (twice), Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, as well as visiting Tuvalu for the Pacific Islands Forum. This was the first ever bilateral visit to Fiji by an Australian prime minister, the first to the Solomon Islands in 10 years, and the first to Vanuatu since 1990.<sup>82</sup> Australia also established a new 'Office of the Pacific'—a whole-of-government arrangement to coordinate engagement with Pacific island countries—and launched a new infrastructure bank for the Pacific.<sup>83</sup>

Ultimately, the goal of Australia's step up is to more closely bind Pacific island states to Australia. As much is spelt out in the 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper, which suggests Canberra will look to 'integrate Pacific island countries into Australian and New Zealand economies and security institutions'.<sup>84</sup> Regional economic integration has been a goal for Canberra for decades. In 2017 after long and difficult negotiations, Canberra concluded a regional free trade arrangement with Pacific island countries. However, the deal, called PACER-Plus, did little to address key constraints to international trade, and the largest island economies—Papua New Guinea and Fiji—refused to sign up to it.<sup>85</sup> Island governments were more supportive of arrangements allowing Pacific workers to fill seasonal labour shortages. After New Zealand introduced a Pacific labour scheme in 2007, and Australia followed suit soon thereafter, tens of thousands of Pacific islanders took up the opportunity to work in both countries. Canberra has moved to deepen cooperation between Australian security agencies and island counterparts, including through intelligence sharing and training. In 2019 a new Australia-Pacific Security College was established in Canberra, to train a regional network of security officials and help Pacific island states 'develop and implement' national security strategies.<sup>86</sup> Australia also established a Pacific Fusion Centre, a new institution (initially based in Canberra) which collates information from various agencies, including 'real-time' satellite data, to improve maritime domain awareness and provide curated security advice for Pacific officials. In addition, a new Pacific Faculty was established at the Australian Institute for Police Management, and Australia funded a new Pacific Cyber Security Operational Network. The integration of Pacific security agencies into Australian security institutions was capped off by a new, annual, Joint Heads of Pacific Security Forces meeting (the inaugural meeting was co-hosted in Brisbane in October 2019 by Australia's Defence Chief, Australia's Federal Police Commissioner and Border Force Commissioner). In recent times Australia has also dramatically increased its military presence in the Pacific. New initiatives include: announcement of a new naval base on Manus Island; joint development of a regional military base in Fiji; a new rotational Australian Defence Force mobile training force for the Pacific—based in Brisbane; an increase in security spending in Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and Fiji; and the announcement of a new 'large naval ship' that will operate semi-permanently in the South Pacific.

Divergent interpretations of threats, and of interests, are likely to continue to be a source of ongoing tension between Australia and Pacific island countries. It is galling for island leaders that Australian policymakers have a newfound interest in the Pacific in the narrow context of concern about a more powerful China. Having acted counter to the Pacific's stated security concerns, Australian officials have asked island leaders to set aside concern about climate change to focus on what Canberra itself sees as a first order security threat. To ameliorate ongoing tensions, Australian policymakers will themselves need to grapple with climate change as a security threat. Of course, recent large-scale bushfires in Australia make it clear that climate change is not just a security threat for island states.<sup>87</sup> At a minimum, Canberra could appreciate that Pacific island states understand climate change as a first order strategic issue. Failure to do so will likely undercut Australia's own ambitions in the Pacific.



If the Australian government does move to take meaningful action on climate change, the collective diplomacy of the *Blue Pacific* will prove important. At the 2019 Pacific Islands Forum, Prime Minister Scott Morrison told his island counterparts that 'Australia alone cannot cool the planet' and emphasised China's emissions as a case in point.<sup>88</sup> But Australia has a history of building coalitions to shape multilateral rules, and could leverage diplomatic resources to strengthen global ambition to reduce emissions.<sup>89</sup> Working with Pacific island nations and New Zealand as a regional bloc would dramatically enhance Australian soft-power. Yet integrating Pacific islands into Australian economic and security institutions is not the same as supporting Pacific regionalism. Island leaders are looking for recognition of their unique interests and are working together as a bloc to pursue them. They have repositioned themselves as custodians of a vast maritime continent. By contrast, much of Australia's recent step up in the Pacific is essentially unilateral in nature, driven by its own security concerns, and key substantive elements have been designed in Canberra. If Australian policymakers are to cement relations with the *Blue Pacific*, they will need to do more to engage with island states as partners, on their own terms, and to develop initiatives together. Ameliorating tensions and finding consensus will require sustained engagement. Ultimately, to properly appreciate the concerns of the *Blue Pacific*, Australia will need to overcome preconceptions that have 'flowed from its tendency to see this region as its "own patch"'.<sup>90</sup>

## Conclusion

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This paper has considered the contemporary geopolitics of the Pacific Ocean, with a focus on the agency and diplomacy of 14 independent Pacific island nations who have defined themselves as a maritime continent—the *Blue Pacific*. This contemporary expression of regional identity draws on a shared cultural affinity with the ocean which predates any European presence in the Pacific, and has been reinforced by recognition (under the UN Law of the Sea) of sovereign rights across ocean spaces. As this paper explains, the *Blue Pacific* is but the latest example of collective action by island leaders, who have used regional strategies to negotiate and manage impinging global pressures. Today, indigenous Pacific regionalism continues to be an important political phenomenon, guided by foundational ideas about self-determination, by key diplomatic norms of consultation and consensus-building, and by pan-Pacific cultural connections.

Today, the Pacific Ocean lies at the heart of two world-wrenching phenomena. A warming ocean is driving cataclysmic changes to the Earth's climate system, whilst a shift in the balance of sea power from the United States to China threatens to disrupt the regional security order. Both phenomena mean Pacific states are increasingly important in international affairs. Pacific leaders will look to leverage their shared oceanic identity, their unique moral authority, and UN votes, to press for more ambitious climate action. As China grows more powerful, the United States and allies like Japan and Australia will no doubt engage even more closely with Pacific island governments. It is concern about a rising China that underpins Canberra's recent step up in the Pacific, which aims to consolidate political influence, and to integrate island states into Australia's domestic security architecture. While much of this renewed engagement with Pacific states has been welcomed by island leaders, they are uncomfortable being cast as pawns in a power play-off between larger states, and insist Pacific island states have unique interests.

Ultimately, the *Blue Pacific* should be taken seriously. Pacific island states will continue to draw from their pan-Pacific identity to pursue collective action strategies in international affairs. Island states are currently preparing a 2050 strategy for the *Blue Pacific*, a long-term vision to work together as one maritime continent. Failure to appreciate the concerns and interests of independent Pacific island states could undermine prospects for regional cooperation. Most pointedly, continued failure to tackle climate change will hamper Australia's strategic ambition in the region. By contrast, efforts to work *with* Pacific island states, and guided by uniquely Pacific norms of diplomacy, would do much to cement relations. Indeed, supporting the collective diplomacy of the *Blue Pacific* would dramatically enhance Australia's own soft-power. Perhaps most importantly; if Australian policymakers decide to take meaningful action to reduce emissions, and to develop international strategy to drive global action on climate change, they will likely find Pacific island states to be powerful allies.

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