

Reconciling regional security narratives in the Pacific

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REGIONAL OUTLOOK Climate Action

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Regional Outlook

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Abstract

Prevailing narratives of security in the Pacific have been framed as a contest between the so-called Indo-Pacific security narrative with its China-threat focus and the human-security and environment focus of the so-called Blue Pacific narrative. The main purpose of this paper is to explore areas of convergence as well as divergence in these regional security narratives. It examines the possibilities of cooperation arising from the Boe Declaration adopted by the Pacific Islands Forum in 2018. By advancing an expanded concept of security, this Declaration highlights that some degree of convergence has taken place at the declaratory, if not conceptual, levels. The paper suggests that the current geopolitical environment provides opportunities for Pacific states to drive their agenda by leveraging the complementary security interests of major external powers in the region. However strategic competition between the major powers could in the long term be counterproductive to achieving the region's climate change goals and ambitions.

KEYWORDS: Pacific islands; geopolitics; regionalism; security narrative; climate change

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Introduction

The emergence of China as a regional power in the Pacific has led to a new era of geopolitical rivalry in the region, with the US, Australia, Japan and New Zealand, among others, launching major policy initiatives for the Pacific islands.¹ This enhanced engagement has been driven by a narrative based on geo-strategic security concerns. Changes in regional geopolitics have coincided with the emergence of a more assertive, independent and innovative diplomacy by Pacific island states.² This paradigm shift in Pacific diplomacy positioned the region to advance a quite different regional security narrative, based on an expanded concept of security and focused on climate change. This is captured in the Boe Declaration on regional security adopted by Forum leaders at their summit in Nauru in 2018.³

These regional developments have been framed as a contest between divergent security paradigms: between the so-called Indo-Pacific security narrative with its China-threat focus and the human-security and environment focus of the so-called Blue Pacific narrative.⁴ Underpinning such a framing is the question of whether one or other will eventually prevail. But such representations also highlight the problem of how to 'bridge the divide'⁵ and to ensure these narratives 'don't talk past each other'.⁶ This reflects the broader significance of contending security narratives, which expose tensions in the foreign policies of regional powers and potentially undermine strategic interests and partnerships.⁷

Australia, being a member of the Pacific Islands Forum, has come under particular pressure. As the former Tuvalu Prime Minister declared: 'We cannot be regional partners under this step up initiative—genuine and durable partners—unless the Government of Australia takes a more progressive response to climate change.'⁸ This point was underscored by Oxfam in its background briefing report to the 2019 Forum summit: 'If Australia is to remain a valued and trusted member of the Pacific family, and with that retain the ability to have a say in the region's future, then it must begin responding to the number one priority of Pacific island countries – climate change'.⁹ So how to 'bridge the divide'?

The purpose of this paper is to explore areas of convergence as well as divergence in these regional security narratives. Drawing on past evidence of compromise and cooperative security, it argues that common ground is possible despite divergent security interests. The paper examines the possibilities of cooperation arising from the Boe Declaration adopted by the Pacific Islands Forum in 2018. By advancing an expanded concept of security, this Declaration highlights that some degree of convergence has taken place at the declaratory, if not conceptual, levels. The paper suggests that the current geopolitical environment provides opportunities for the Pacific states to drive their agenda by leveraging the complementary security interests of major external powers in the region. However strategic competition between the major powers could in the long term be counterproductive to achieving the region's climate change goals and ambitions.

The paper is divided into three main parts. The first part briefly describes the security narrative that has accompanied the changing geopolitics of the Pacific islands region and the counter narrative of regional security that the Pacific islands have articulated in the context of the new Pacific diplomacy. The second section examines past examples of security cooperation that 'succeeded' despite divergent security perspectives of the major players.

The third section addresses the potential for the Boe Declaration to advance common and complementary security interests and agendas.

1. Contending narratives

The growing presence and power of China in the Pacific has triggered significant policy responses from traditional Pacific powers, namely the US, Australia, New Zealand and Japan.¹⁰ A key feature of these responses has been the framing of the wider region as Indo-Pacific—as opposed to Asia-Pacific. This is seen as an important feature of the new geopolitics of the Pacific and aims to unite key allies in the region. From the US point of view, Indo-Pacific strategy is also ‘about competing with the Belt and Road Initiative, pushing back in the South China Sea, and negotiating or renegotiating bilateral trade deals’.¹¹

The security narrative that has underpinned and framed these initiatives essentially reflects a ‘traditional geopolitical view of security’.¹² China is perceived as a ‘strategic competitor’, aspiring to ‘regional hegemony’ in the Indo-Pacific. Increased US engagement in the Pacific islands aims to ‘preserve a free and open Indo-Pacific, maintain access, and promote our status as security partner of choice’.¹³ Pacific island states are therefore encouraged to remain wedded to traditional partners; and by implication to exclude China. This recalls the ‘strategic denial’ posture of the Cold War era.¹⁴

Within this narrative, security threats to the Pacific islands have been defined in terms of their vulnerability to economic and political influence from China. This is seen to arise in the context of increasing Chinese loans to support infrastructure development in the Pacific. Alluding to this concern, the New Zealand Ministry of Defence stated: ‘Steep debt burdens associated with infrastructure projects have potential implications for influence, access and governance’.¹⁵ Portraying Chinese loans as a potential threat to Pacific islands’ sovereignty feeds into the narrative of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy, which is aimed in part at ‘preserving small states’ sovereignty’.¹⁶

This perspective of China as a threat has been challenged by Pacific island leaders, who instead see opportunities for development assistance, security cooperation and market access. As the PIFS Secretary General stated: ‘Forum Island countries have been excluded from the sorts of financing, technology and infrastructure that can enable us to fully engage in a globalised world. Many countries see the rise of China and its increasing interest in the region as providing an opportunity to rectify that’.¹⁷ China is also viewed as a more amenable development partner, with ‘less stringent processes for getting large infrastructure projects implemented’.¹⁸

To strengthen regional solidarity and to amplify the region’s voice and influence, the Pacific Islands Forum has adopted a collective identity known as Blue Pacific. If there is an agenda behind the Blue Pacific identity it is about empowerment. There has been a very deliberate attempt to challenge notions of small, vulnerable and fragile—as the dominant characterisations of the island states—with a counter narrative emphasising the collective strength of ‘large ocean states’. The Blue Pacific narrative also challenges the portrayal of the Pacific islands as ‘passive collaborators or victims of a new wave of colonialism’.¹⁹

The Blue Pacific identity frames the Pacific’s own security narrative and agenda. Within this narrative, security is by definition comprehensive and multi-dimensional. This is captured in the discourse around climate change. Over time climate change has come to be defined as posing an existential threat, leaving no doubt what action was needed: ‘The survival of vulnerable small island developing states can only be guaranteed if there is concerted global effort to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to maintain the temperature increase below 1.5 degrees Celsius’.²⁰ In this context, the large polluters are seen to be responsible for the principal threat to the region. In 1997, the Smaller Islands States group within the PIF condemned Australia for opposing strict reductions of greenhouse gas

emissions.²¹ This position has gained strength in recent years. Indeed, a defining feature of the new Pacific diplomacy has been the willingness of Pacific leaders to speak truth to power—in calling out political leaders of their much larger developed partners, and Australia in particular. The 2019 Pacific Leaders Forum provides a number of examples of this.²²

The above discussion raises the question of how the Pacific's regional security priorities on climate change—and human security more broadly—can be advanced alongside the geopolitical and geostrategic priorities of the region's major external powers. Past examples of security cooperation provide some evidence of compromise and of cooperative security.

2. Evidence from the past

Pacific island states count as their major regional security achievements the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone of 1985 and the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) from 2003 to 2017.²³ The Multilateral Fisheries Access Agreement between the United States and Pacific Islands countries adopted in 1987 that ended the so-called 'tuna wars' between the US and the region can also be counted as a key security achievement.²⁴ What is significant about these is that they 'succeeded' despite divergent security perspectives and imperatives of the major players. Contending narratives on security, in other words, did not preclude cooperation to achieve common or complementary objectives.

The South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone (Treaty of Rarotonga) adopted in 1985 is regarded as one of the key regional security achievements in the Pacific – a contribution to global as well as regional nuclear non-proliferation. But it was also a compromise; the product of competing interests and priorities of Forum member states. While some Forum member states were staunchly anti-nuclear (including New Zealand in the mid-1980s) others sought to balance their opposition to nuclear testing and waste dumping with their relationships with the US. (They included Fiji and Tonga). The main architect of the Treaty was Australia who proposed a limited nuclear free zone; one that it believed would not conflict with the strategic interests of its ally (the US) by not proscribing nuclear armed vessels transiting the region or visiting ports. This proposal was initially opposed by four Pacific island countries (PNG, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and Nauru), who advocated a more comprehensive nuclear free zone. But in the end consensus prevailed and the treaty was adopted.²⁵

It could be argued that the Treaty met the minimum requirements of a nuclear free zone, thus to some extent defusing regional anti-nuclear pressures. US fears and concerns that it would encourage anti-nuclear feeling in the region were largely dispelled. While the US refused to accede to the Treaty's protocols (a situation that continues to this day) it nevertheless respected them. French nuclear testing continued, intermittently, for a further 11 years. But France eventually acceded to the Treaty protocols—joining China and Russia.

Strategic interests and Cold War geopolitics were more explicitly evident, and effectively utilised by the Pacific, in the context of the 1987 Multilateral Treaty on Fisheries between the governments of certain Pacific island countries and the government of the United States of America. The significance of this Treaty was that it successfully addressed the very different yet complementary security agendas of the US and the Pacific island states. The so-called 'tuna wars' of the early to mid-1980s had been fuelled by US refusal to recognise coastal state sovereign rights to tuna occurring within Exclusive Economic Zones. This led to some Pacific island states apprehending and confiscating US tuna boats caught fishing within their waters without a licence; action that triggered retaliatory measures by the US government. It was not until two Pacific island states (Kiribati and Vanuatu) concluded bilateral fisheries access agreements with the Soviet Union, in 1985 and 1986 respectively, and several others (Fiji and Papua New Guinea) mooted the possibility of doing the same, that regional negotiations with the US made any significant progress. With US Government funding, the 1987 Treaty secured unprecedented financial returns for the region, and guaranteed fishing access to the US tuna fleet. It also greatly enhanced maritime surveillance and enforcement. Meanwhile neither bilateral access agreement with the Soviet Union was renewed.²⁶

The Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) is held up as the most prominent example of regional security cooperation—encapsulating a 'truly Pacific

approach’ to restoring law and order, peace and stability. But its genesis lay not in the deterioration of security in Solomon Islands per se, but in Australia’s assessment of the global security context—namely the War on Terror. Indeed, it is possible that RAMSI—which relied on Australian leadership and resources—may never have happened had the international situation been different. Two earlier requests to Australia for assistance had in fact gone unheeded. RAMSI was a product of Australia’s strategic interests in stabilising a ‘porous and undeveloped region’. This in turn formed part of its contribution to the US-led War on Terror. The use of regional multilateralism (RAMSI) rather than a unilateral intervention was due in part to the influence of other Forum members—most notably New Zealand. This intervention was legitimised by the request from the Solomon Islands Government and carried out under the mandate of a regional mechanism known as the Biketawa Declaration. RAMSI thus became a ‘Pacific-model’ of cooperative intervention, based on a regional mandate and formal legal agreement of the elected Government, in this case the Parliament of Solomon Islands.²⁷

The above examples point to the way different security narratives and agendas came together to deliver outcomes broadly acceptable to all regional parties. Can the same occur with the Boe Declaration?

3. Possibilities of the Boe Declaration

The Boe Declaration has as its starting point ‘an expanded concept of security’. In keeping with the priorities of the Pacific states, the declaration ‘reaffirms that climate change remains the single greatest threat to the livelihoods, security and wellbeing of the peoples of the Pacific’ and reaffirms the region’s ‘commitment to progress the implementation of the Paris Agreement’.²⁸ Defining climate change as ‘the single greatest threat’ provides significant weight to the Pacific in shaping the security narrative in the region.²⁹ It also provides leverage to the Pacific island states in their efforts to influence the policies and actions of the world’s largest emitters of greenhouse gases. These include fellow Forum member Australia as well as Forum Dialogue partners the US and China. All are expected to align their security engagement around the priority areas of the Boe Declaration.³⁰

At the same time, this initiative provides an opportunity to advance the geopolitical agenda of Western powers. This is through the commitments made under the Boe Declaration for stronger regional security architecture; for improved coordination among existing security mechanisms; and for shared security analysis, assessment and advice. For Australia and New Zealand in particular, this presents an opportunity to bolster their influence over regional security cooperation. Both Australia and New Zealand are members of the Forum Subcommittee on Regional Security—established under the Boe Declaration—and Australia funded the attendance of Pacific island delegations to its first meeting in 2019. Australia is also funding related security initiatives such as the Pacific Fusion Centre and the Australia Pacific Security College.³¹

Although not stated explicitly, it is understood that by strengthening—if not cementing—their place in the regional security architecture Australia and New Zealand can minimise, or contain, the influence of China. They can also ensure the Pacific remains tethered to Australia, New Zealand and other traditional security partners through the defence ties that such arrangements facilitate.

Australia and other traditional partners have thus aligned their security engagement with the region around the priority area of the Boe Declaration that calls for the strengthening of national security capacity. This is evident through the maritime surveillance efforts of the US, Australia, New Zealand and also Japan—such as US Ship-rider agreements and Australia’s Pacific patrol boat program. Promoting partnerships, interoperability and ‘burden sharing’ is a key component of this strategy. Since 2017 major Western allies with interests in the Pacific—the US, Japan, Australia and New Zealand—have strengthened their joint security dialogues and cooperation with respect to the island states. Security dialogues have focused on strengthening port security, enhanced information sharing, and building institutional collaboration and military-to-military cooperation.³²

This approach corresponds with the geopolitical narrative and agenda of shoring up the so-called rules-based order: capacity building serves to bolster Pacific island states’ defence and law enforcement capabilities, and therefore sovereignty and territorial integrity. This approach also has the underlying objective of maintaining—or reclaiming in the case of Fiji—their position as security partners of choice.

There is evidence that Pacific island states have taken advantage of this geopolitical imperative to drive their own broad-based security agenda. Enhancing the capacity of national maritime, defence and law enforcement agencies provide the islands states with the ability to counter cross border threats from transnational crime and illegal, unreported

and unregulated (IUU) fishing, as well as to respond to climate change threats—namely humanitarian and disaster response. This is one dimension of climate security.

An example of complementary security agendas at work is the Black Rock training camp in Fiji. Australia is providing assistance to develop the former Fiji military forces camp into a regional training centre—dedicated to peacekeeping, disaster preparedness and humanitarian response. For Australia, this development is seen as a ‘symbol of our partnership, a long-term and enduring commitment ... [It aims] to increase the interoperability between our militaries as well as our police forces’ and build people to people ties.³³ Australia will also be funding a Maritime Essential Services Centre in Fiji, to facilitate maritime security coordination within Fiji and throughout the region.

Fiji’s ambitions are to provide a regional training facility for other Pacific island states, but also to develop its own capacity to be a ‘security partner of choice’ in the region.³⁴ While it has turned to Australia for support, Fiji remains open to overtures from other willing partners, including China and Indonesia.³⁵

Supporting Pacific island national security capacity around maritime law enforcement, disaster response and border control reflect a shared interest in strengthening state sovereignty and territorial integrity.

This provides a basis for convergence between the security agenda of major partners and that of the Pacific island states. But there is a related point of convergence that derives from the security-related imperatives of responding to climate threats both within the region and beyond – what is now called a climate ‘crisis’ and ‘emergency’. These include threats to the stability and viability of Pacific island states and more broad-based and systemic crises impacting on the region’s partners and neighbours. There is thus a security imperative to support the Pacific’s mitigation and adaptation efforts. This underpins one of Australia’s key justifications for aid to the region, which is the Pacific’s ‘high vulnerability to the impacts of climate change and natural disasters’.³⁶

There are indications that regional partners are now going further, by integrating climate change into their own defence planning and decision-making. New Zealand, for example, has taken significant steps towards aligning defence, if not domestic, policies to the Boe Declaration’s key priorities. The 2018 Strategic Defence Policy Statement for the first time recognised climate change as ‘a major driver of military operations’. A follow-up Defence Assessment report released in December 2018, titled ‘the Climate Crisis’, described climate change as posing a significant threat to both national and regional security. New Zealand has thus taken ‘a proactive approach in promoting global recognition of climate change as a security risk’.³⁷ The US, under the Biden Administration, has also explicitly linked climate change and security. This is underscored by former Secretary of State John Kerry’s appointment as Presidential envoy on climate change, a Cabinet level position that is housed within the National Security Council.³⁸

Conclusion

Pacific states have gradually succeeded in pushing climate change to the forefront of the regional security narrative and paradigm, where it is now defined both as an existential threat and as a threat multiplier. It is exacerbating, amongst other things, the damage and risks caused by nuclear waste; and adversely impacting fisheries and agriculture and thus food security. The current pandemic, with its unprecedented health and economic security shocks, has augmented this security narrative. As Fiji's Minister for the economy declared: 'COVID-19—like climate change—is a transboundary threat and one that again signals the need to proactively shape the vision for the future we want.'³⁹

This discussion has suggested that the current geopolitical environment provides opportunities for the Pacific to drive their agenda by leveraging the complementary security interests of major external powers in the region. Indeed, it could be argued that geopolitical tensions—stemming from China's rising influence in the region—have benefitted the Pacific's efforts to address climate change and related security priorities such as maritime security and disaster preparedness. Competition with China in what is recognised as a 'region of strategic geopolitical importance' has encouraged key partners, such as Australia and New Zealand, to endorse the security narrative of the Boe Declaration and led to greater security collaboration. Meanwhile the policy of 'strategic denial' has been bolstered to some extent, as China continues to be excluded from key dialogues such as Joint Heads of Pacific Security meeting, an initiative under Australia's Pacific Step Up.⁴⁰

However, continuing geopolitical tensions and strategic competition between the major powers could in the longer term prove counterproductive to achieving the region's climate change goals and ambitions. Ultimately what is needed is 'greater ambition on climate action' by the world's major emitters. This arguably requires more cooperation, not less, among all the major powers. Much may depend on the new Biden Administration in the US and on the prospects this raises for strengthening multilateral approaches to tackling the climate crisis and to promoting engagement with China in this endeavour.

On the one hand the US under a new Democrat administration has reengaged with the Paris Agreement, with Special Presidential Envoy on Climate Change John Kerry, vowing 'to treat the climate crisis as the urgent national security threat it is'.⁴¹ But there are no indications that geopolitical tensions are likely to be reduced with China. US concerns about China's role in the Pacific are, if anything, becoming more alarmist. This has led to new aid commitments to the region, including a \$200 million package announced in November 2020 as well as proposals for a US military presence in PNG and Palau.⁴²

So how to tackle the climate crisis and overcome geopolitical tensions? This requires both the US and China moving beyond a paradigm of strategic competition and embracing a common status of 'responsible stakeholder'. As one commentator observed: 'By linking geopolitics and climate, the United States and China have an opportunity to improve the prospects of both'.⁴³

At the regional level the Pacific may be well positioned to advance this link between geopolitics and climate through the Blue Pacific narrative. As described in an Oxfam Report, Blue Pacific 'captures the growing geostrategic and economic significance of the region, and cements a powerful narrative of self-determination based on Pacific values'.⁴⁴ Within this narrative a 'friends to all approach' has been adopted by Pacific Islands leaders as the 'accepted modality for engagement and for building relationships and partnerships'.⁴⁵ This could provide the basis for building a more open and inclusive regional order; where the complementary security interests of all states are prioritized and advanced.

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