

# Current Pressures on the Pacific Island Regional Security Architecture

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## Introduction

A great deal has changed since my chapter on security and the Pacific Island regional architecture in the 2015 volume *Regionalism, Security & Cooperation in Oceania*.<sup>1</sup> The main driver for the regional security transformation has been a new appreciation of China's increasing influence regionally and globally.<sup>2</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic, the increasing international consensus on the effects of climate change and Donald Trump's "America first" foreign policy have also impacted to some degree on regional security orientations and options over the past seven years. In addition to these broader influences, the region<sup>3</sup> itself has changed to take greater control of its security interests. As a result, the recently installed Secretary General of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), Henry Puna, expressed concern

1 R.A. Herr, "Regional Security Architecture in the Pacific Islands Region: Rummaging through the Blueprints", Rouben Azizian and Carleton Cramer (ed) *Regionalism, Security & Cooperation in Oceania* (Honolulu: Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, 2015), pp 17-31.

2 Zanny Minton Beddoes, "Rivalry between America and China will shape post-covid world", *The Economist*, November 8, 2021, <https://www.economist.com/the-world-ahead/2021/11/08/rivalry-between-america-and-china-will-shape-the-post-covid-world>

3 The Pacific Island region is defined by the ambit of the Pacific Community. The terms "Pacific Islands" and the abbreviated forms "Island" or "Islands" are capitalized to denote both the region and those polities within it as distinct from other Pacific islands such as Hawai'i or Okinawa, which are islands outside this region.

whether the region could manage the dangers arising from the new and “complex geo-political environment.”<sup>4</sup>

Responding to these challenges, the leadership and members of PIF have made three important claims on behalf of the region’s interests in these changing strategic circumstances. One is an objection to having Pacific Island concerns rolled into the broader security arrangements of the Indo-Pacific where they will inevitably be minimized.<sup>5</sup> A second is a plea for unity. Former PIF Secretary General, Dame Meg Taylor, expressed a fear that the regional architecture might buckle under the new international pressures. As she observed, “if we divide into our sub-regions and then get played off by geo-strategic interests, our own interests as a collective will be undermined.”<sup>6</sup> The third claim is for a collective stewardship of the “Blue Pacific,”<sup>7</sup> essentially leveraging their vast EEZs and related ocean entitlements to assert grounds for a larger global diplomatic presence.

This chapter assesses the prospects of the Pacific Island regional security architecture converting the Forum Island Countries (FIC) aspirations for coping with their new complex geo-political environment into security deliverables. This discussion is qualified by two important limitations. Even as this chapter is being drafted, the cohesion of the PIF remains very much in doubt. While the effects of the collapse of the PIF would be dramatic and quite possibly lead to substantial renovation of the region’s institutional architecture, the detritus from the current dispute is likely to take some time to clear away with no insignificant consequences.

Secondly, COVID-19 has had many consequences across the Pacific Island region. Most have been negative but some have been positive such

4 Pacific Islands Forum Secretary-General Henry Puna, ‘We will fight back, together, and win back, together’, Opening remarks to the Forum Economic Officials Meeting, July 6, 2021, <https://www.forumsec.org/2021/07/06/we-will-fight-back-together-and-win-back-together-sg-puna-to-forum-economic-officials-2021/>

5 Henry Ivarature, ‘Creating an inclusive Indo-Pacific’, Asia and the Pacific Policy Society Policy Forum, June 29, 2021, <https://www.policyforum.net/creating-an-inclusive-indo-pacific/>

6 Johnny Blades, ‘Outgoing Pacific Forum head warns about external influences’, Newshub, May 31, 2021, <https://www.newshub.co.nz/home/politics/2021/05/outgoing-pacific-forum-head-warns-about-external-influences.html>

7 Grant Wyeth, ‘Paying Attention to the Blue Pacific’, *The Diplomat*, October 30, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/10/paying-attention-to-the-blue-pacific/>

as the development of the Pacific Humanitarian Pathway.<sup>8</sup> Arguably, one of the more politically destructive regional influences of the pandemic has been the year-long internecine struggle over the future of the PIF. Extra-regionally, meeting the manifold challenges of COVID have heightened suspicions of Chinese malign intentions to undermine the region's traditional Western friendships and the shared security interests based on these ties.<sup>9</sup> The economic and political consequences of COVID and the transitioning out of COVID emergency measures remain far from clear. COVID's impacts on the fragile economies of the region's microstates may serve to deepen some bilateral linkages. However, regional cooperation equally needs to be strengthened to hasten political stability and a return to pre-COVID economic levels.

### Regional Security Community and China

Increased suspicion of Chinese actions and motives has been the major change regarding regional security and the role of China in the Islands since Xi Jinping's accession to the PRC Presidency in 2013. Earlier cautious optimism amongst the region's traditional friends that the PRC might pursue an acceptably cooperative approach in its engagement with the Pacific Islands has largely evaporated. The Chinese tactics *inter alia* in the South China Sea, economic coercion against Australia, and the wolf warrior approach to diplomacy have heightened Western cynicism regarding Chinese ambitions more broadly. Within the Island region, these concerns have been echoed in criticisms of "roads to nowhere," overpriced buildings ill-suited to tropical conditions and "debt diplomacy."<sup>10</sup>

There is an agreed perception regionally that China's growing international assertiveness is having a destabilizing influence. However, the focus for, and cause of, the disruption is not agreed. The Island states have been hesitant to re-evaluate their relations with China in line with Western threat perceptions. Having come to accept China as a legitimate actor in the

8 Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, "Pacific Islands Forum Foreign Ministers Agree to Establish a Pacific Humanitarian Pathway on COVID -19", April, 8 2020, <https://www.forumsec.org/2020/04/08/pacific-islands-forum-foreign-ministers-agree-to-establish-a-pacific-humanitarian-pathway-on-covid-19/>

9 Jonathan Pryke and Richard McGregor, 'China's coronavirus aid to Pacific islands is part of geopolitical game', The Lowy Institute, April 23, 2020, <https://www.loyyinstitute.org/publications/china-coronavirus-aid-pacific-islands-part-geopolitical-game>.

10 ABC Radio, "Federal Minister Concetta Fierravanti-Wells accuses China of funding 'roads that go nowhere' in Pacific", January 10, 2018, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-01-10/australia-hits-out-at-chinese-aid-to-pacific/9316732>

region, the Island countries have been unwilling to completely reverse their view of the PRC as quickly as their Western partners. This is not to say that the Island states accept Chinese interests as entirely benign. The debt diplomacy meme has effectively dented Chinese soft power, particularly at the village level, where traditional land tenure systems and subsistence agriculture loom large.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, the meme has had less success amongst Island political and bureaucratic elites who are more inclined to focus on Chinese aid and the PRC's economic success. Significantly for the sentiment of belonging to a shared "security community,"<sup>12</sup> extra-regional perceptions of some level of military threat from China have not loomed large either in the village or amongst regional elites.

The prospect of being caught up as collateral damage in the strengthening strategic competition is recognized but not regarded uniformly as a negative. Former PIF Secretary General, Dame Meg Taylor, was inclined to argue that there could be a silver lining to the strategic jockeying. In her view, the attention the rivalry brought offered "greater options for financing and development . . . through the increased competition in our region."<sup>13</sup> Her comments echoed the old Cold War sentiments that being able to bargain for strategic access could be lucrative for meeting Island development aspirations. Her views have had some academic support on the grounds that the Island leadership have demonstrated a more sophisticated agency in leveraging the rivalry with China to the benefit of the regional states than is commonly recognized.<sup>14</sup>

There are several key differences between the regional risks in the current period of strategic rivalry and the Cold War of more than a generation ago. The Soviet Union had none of the advantages that the PRC

11 Richard Herr, *Chinese influence in the Pacific Islands: the yin and yang of Soft Power*, ASPI Special Report, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, Canberra, Australia, 2019, pp. 1-44, <http://ecite.utas.edu.au/132796>

12 Karl Deutsch's 1957 security community concept has seemed particularly relevant to the PIF states given they have long had a sense of common belonging, where physical conflict amongst members is virtually unthinkable and where they are unlikely to allow their territory to become a threat to their neighbors.

13 Pacific Islands Forum Secretary-General Dame Meg Taylor, 'The China alternative: changing regional order in the Pacific Islands', keynote address to University of the South Pacific, February 8, 2019, <https://www.forumsec.org/2019/02/12/keynote-address-by-dame-meg-taylor-secretary-general-the-china-alternative-changing-regional-order-in-the-pacific-islands/>

14 Steven Ratuva, "Pacific Island Agency in the Global Game of Competitive Geo-political Bidding", Australian Institute of International Affairs, June 6, 2019, <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/pacific-island-agency-in-the-global-game-of-competitive-geo-political-bidding/>

currently enjoys for exploiting any miscalculation a regional state might make in “playing the China card.” The USSR had minimal trade, no real aid program, no significant cultural ties and no diplomatic presence. Playing the Soviet card during the Cold War was a one-sided, transparent bluff. The PRC is deeply ensconced in the region across a range of elites – administrative, economic, political and social. Beijing has a direct capacity to answer and counter criticism of its activities at the highest levels throughout the Pacific Island region.

To be fair, Dame Meg was not unmindful that playing China could be very damaging to the PIF states and their region. She warned that there would always be a price to be paid by the small states participating in an aid auction for access. “Are we going to owe them places for military bases? Are we going to owe them places for their influence and control of the Pacific Ocean?”<sup>15</sup> The problem with her analysis is that it implies an initial state of equality. The region’s traditional friends have a generally privileged strategic role in the region due to historical relations, territories in the region, proximity to the region, logistical assets and some military bases within or adjacent to the region. The consequences for Western security would be vastly different if China did secure a military base in the South Pacific compared with any upgrading of, for example, American or French facilities in the region.

### **Security without defense; bricks without straw**

With apologies to Exodus 5:11, a key challenge for the traditional friends of the Pacific Island states to build an acceptable and effective security architecture linking the region’s aspirations to external defense structures is tantamount to making bricks without straw. The basic ingredients for effective formal defense cooperation are largely absent in the Pacific Island region. Regional security as a concept has existed largely apart from defense policy within the region since decolonization. For a variety of reasons, the distinction was scarcely noticed until recently. Re-joining defense and security in the current complex geo-political environment could prove counterproductive. The PIF leadership is concerned that new defense

15 Johnny Blades, ‘Outgoing Pacific Forum head warns about external influences’, Newshub, May 31, 2021, <https://www.newshub.co.nz/home/politics/2021/05/outgoing-pacific-forum-head-warns-about-external-influences.html>

structures are likely to exacerbate strategic rivalry. To understand the PIF quandary, it is useful to look to the Caribbean for contrasts.

The main issue for defense cooperation with the Pacific Island states is the absence of a national defense infrastructure. Only three of the 14 members of the Pacific Small Island Developing States (PSIDS) caucus at the UN have defense establishments.<sup>16</sup> Size is undoubtedly a factor. The two largest states, PNG (9 million) and Fiji (900,000), have noteworthy militaries. Of the rest, only Tonga (100,000) has a defense force which is explained, in part, by being the region's only monarchy with the king's authority over royal guards and the militia being included in the Constitution of 1875.<sup>17</sup>

That all but one of the PSIDS are microstates (populations under 3 million) has not been the only circumstance for the limited defense scaffolding to support a regional security architecture. Western colonial dominance across the Pacific Island region and the remoteness of the area from theatres of strategic rivalry contributed to the issue of defense ranking relatively low on the decolonization agenda. Moreover, based on experience elsewhere, Pacific colonial administrations tended to believe that creating defense forces in the absence of a specific need could prove to be a threat to democracy. Significantly, because decolonization was essentially benign, there were no wars of national liberation to create local militias that could morph later into national defense forces.

Not only did the colonial powers leave without creating self-defense infrastructure for most of the smaller Pacific states but also did not establish formal post-colonial defense obligations to protect their former territories. Rarely explicit, in practice, the defense of most of the newly independent states was underpinned by the UN's collective security mechanisms. While there are no mutual security treaties between any of the regional states, there are some other arrangements that have security implications. The US has compacts of free association with three former territories – the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) and Palau. New Zealand maintains a similar

16 The use of PSIDS for these comparisons is mainly for the convenience of not complicating matters with the two French territories – French Polynesia and New Caledonia. Neither is in the UN but are currently in the PIF although their status under the 2005 PIF Treaty may be reviewed.

17 Tonga's Constitution of 1875 with Amendments through 1988, Art 22, [https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Tonga\\_1988.pdf](https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Tonga_1988.pdf)

relationship with two – the Cook Islands and Niue. These arrangements create some non-reciprocal defense obligations, although it is not clear whether these are obligatory or whether the Island state could initiate defense protection. As revealed dramatically by the Australian intervention in the Solomon Islands during the November 2021 civil strife, Australia does have a bilateral security agreement with the Solomon Islands.<sup>18</sup> However, this agreement does not create mutual security obligations having been concluded primarily to provide insurance against post-RAMSI (Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands) instability.

The post-colonial defense infrastructure of the island microstates of the Caribbean region contrasts noticeably from that of the Pacific Island region. It helps to illustrate limitations on constructing a security relationship with the Pacific Island region that includes a strong defense component. The two regions comprise the largest concentrations of insular microstates in the world. The Caribbean region has 10 small island states ranging in size from just over 52 thousand (Saint Kitts and Nevis) to under 3 million (Jamaica). The Pacific Island region has 13 states with populations under 3 million ranging from just over 10,000 (Tuvalu) to about 900,000 (Fiji). For all the similarities, there are significant contextual differences between the two regions. The Pacific states are remote from major global population centers while the Caribbean states are virtually surrounded by nearby markets with hundreds of millions of potential customers. Moreover, the Pacific states are relatively remote from each other in contrast with the compactness of the members of the Caribbean region.

As given in Table 1.1 (page 24), six of the ten Caribbean states currently have military establishments. Two of these – Antigua and Barbuda and Saint Kitts and Nevis – have populations less than Tonga. Dominica, the second smallest of the regional states, had its own defense force until 1981. However, this was disbanded pending the creation of the Regional Security System (RSS), a 1982 mutual security pact for the defense of the eastern Caribbean. Three of the five founding members – Dominica, Saint Lucia, and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines – did not have military forces when they signed an agreement to give mutual assistance on

18 Agreement Between the Government of Australia and The Government of Solomon Islands Concerning the Basis for Deployment of Police, Armed Forces and Other Personnel to Solomon Islands, <http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/other/dfat/treaties/ATS/2018/14.html>

request. The other two founding members – Antigua and Barbuda and Barbados – did have military forces. Saint Kitts and Nevis joined on independence the next year and Grenada, the only remaining state without a defense establishment, joined the mutual protection alliance in 1985.

**Table 1.1: National military establishments**

Country	Military	Population	Area (sq km)
Antigua and Barbuda	Royal Antigua and Barbuda Defense Force	96,286	442
The Bahamas	Royal Bahamas Defense Force	385,637	13,943
Barbados	Barbados Defense Force	286,641	430
Dominica	N/A	71,625	751
Jamaica	Jamaica Defense Force	2,934,847	10,991
Grenada	N/A	111,454	344
Saint Kitts and Nevis	Saint Kitts and Nevis Defense Force	52,441	261
Saint Lucia	N/A	181,889	539
Saint Vincent and the Grenadines	N/A	110,211	389
Trinidad and Tobago	Trinidad and Tobago Defense Force	1,389,843	5,130

Thus, the small island states of the Caribbean have considerable agency for self-defense individually and/or cooperatively. Having a substantial defense establishment with intra-regional mutual defense ties gives the Caribbean island states an important edge in promoting their security agenda with the larger powers. Bilateral and multilateral military cooperation with extra-regional powers such as Canada, the UK and the US provide important avenues for defense communication. Significantly, their defense capacity also buys these states a seat in the Committee on Hemispheric Security of the Organization of American States.

If avenues for defense influence similar to those of the Caribbean island states existed in the Pacific Island region, they could potentially enhance PSIDS agency in navigating their security interests through the emerging complexity of the Indo-Pacific arrangements. As it is, the mechanisms available for the PSIDS to directly advance and protect their

regional defense interests are limited. The primary vehicle is the relatively recently formed South Pacific Defense Ministers' Meeting. This is comprised of representatives from Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Tonga, New Zealand, France, Chile and Australia. The US and UK have been included as observers and Japan will be added in 2022. The only inclusive regional mechanism is the PIF's Regional Security Committee (FRSC). The FRSC serves as a clearinghouse for a range of specialist security agencies ranging from customs, police and political security concerns but is not a vehicle for defense cooperation either intra-regionally or externally.

Historically, but only desultorily, the ANZUS mutual defense pact has provided some general defense framework for the region.<sup>19</sup> The principal focus has been to deter military threats to the three allied states through the region rather than to the region generally. The treaty does not define the region as a defense theatre in the same way that the NATO Treaty identified the north Atlantic area. No Island state is a member or directly associated with ANZUS. Thus, the alliance has served more of a political role in the region by cultivating and supporting the sentiment amongst the Island states of belonging to a security community. This has meant that the ANZUS states have enabled regional development and security aspirations with the expectation that stronger regional ties with their neighbors will encourage the regional states to avoid actions that undermine the security of their neighbors or the defense objectives of the alliance.

The mutual obligations in this arrangement had not been especially challenging until the recent rising tensions regarding China. Australia and New Zealand carried the bilateral networking throughout most of the 70 years of the ANZUS alliance as well as much of the defense burden such as through the Pacific Patrol Boat scheme to strengthen regional resource protection capacity. The Pacific states have not pushed the boundaries of "adventurism" although flirtations with alleged Soviet surrogates, Cuba and Libya, ruffled some ANZUS feathers in the 1980s as did two short-lived and benign fisheries deals with the USSR. More seriously, during the period of the 'war on terror,' Western states took steps to deal with the security consequences of a perceived "misuse" of microstate sovereignty. The US reacted strongly to evidence that some states had facilitated or assisted terrorist bodies through passport sales, flags of convenience and/or

19 Richard Herr, Anthony Bergin and Nikolaos Skondrianos, "Sliding-door moments: ANZUS and the Blue Pacific", ASPI Special Report, November 2021, [https://s3-ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/ad-aspi/2021-11/SR%20178%20Sliding%20door%20moments\\_0.pdf?](https://s3-ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/ad-aspi/2021-11/SR%20178%20Sliding%20door%20moments_0.pdf?)

lax financial regulation that enabled significant amounts of money laundering.<sup>20</sup>

The willingness of the Pacific states similarly to accept ANZUS today as a sympathetic regional defense interlocutor on their behalf in the contemporary international environment is problematic. While the PIF members are concerned that the network of security arrangements being developed through the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue<sup>21</sup>, Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific project<sup>22</sup> and AUKUS<sup>23</sup> will minimize their security interests, these complex and largely opaque negotiations seem inaccessible and, probably worse, intended to inhibit their relations with the PRC. The quiet, almost subliminal, trust that has existed between the ANZUS states and the Pacific Island region for more than three decades is losing credibility. In part this is due to internal differences within the alliance on appropriate relations with China and how coordinated they need to be in sharing intelligence about the PRC.<sup>24</sup> Yet, if the Pacific Island states genuinely do not want to be the recipients of unwelcome Indo-Pacific decisions regarding defense arrangements impacting on their regional security aspirations, some ANZUS-based support seems the best option – if it is available.

Individually, the ANZUS partners have embarked in recent years on reconfigured programs to engage bilaterally more fully and effectively with the Pacific states to build the older security linkages. Australia has called its renewed emphasis “Step-up”, New Zealand has “Reset” its relations while the US has made a “Pacific Pledge.”<sup>25</sup> These initiatives serve mainly

20 See for example, Richard Herr and Donald Potter, “Nauru in the Arc of Instability: Too Many Degrees of Freedom?” in Dennis Rumley, Vivian Louis Forbes and Christopher Griffin (eds), *Australia and the Arc of Instability: The political and cultural dynamics of regional security*, Dordrecht, Springer, 2006.

21 Daniel Hurst and Justin McCurry, “Australia and Japan agree in principle to defense pact that will increase military ties”, *The Guardian*, November 17, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/nov/17/australia-and-japan-agree-in-principle-to-defence-pact-that-will-increase-military-ties>

22 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Towards free and open Indo-Pacific*, Japanese Government, November 2019, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000407643.pdf>

23 Ramesh Thakur, “Integrating AUKUS into the Indo-Pacific”, *The Strategist*, September 28, 2021. <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/integrating-aukus-into-the-indo-pacific/>

24 “Mahuta’s Five Eyes comment about China unnecessarily created ‘drama’ - Foreign policy expert” 1News, New Zealand, April 21, 2021, <https://www.1news.co.nz/2021/04/20/mahutas-five-eyes-comment-about-china-unnecessarily-created-drama-foreign-policy-expert/>

25 DFAT, ‘Pacific Step-Up’, Australian Government, no date, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/pacific>; Winston Peters, “Shifting the dial”, eyes wide open, Pacific Reset”, speech at the Lowy Institute, Sydney, March 2, 2018, <https://www.loyyinstitute.org/publications/>

to add resources to support the human security emphasis of the 2018 Boe Declaration on Regional Security currently serves as the PIF island states definitive statement on their priorities.<sup>26</sup> It is hoped that these measures along similar initiatives by the UK, France and Japan will reinforce the regional security community sentiment as compatible and inclusive of the defense interests of the region's "traditional friends."

It is too soon to draw a definitive conclusion but AUKUS seems likely to be particularly problematic in papering over divergent security perceptions between the PIF states and the defense objectives of their closest Western partners. It has reinvigorated the region's nuclear allergy both within the alliance and within the region. New Zealand has not participated in ANZUS Council meetings since the mid-1980s when it banned nuclear ship visits to its ports and the US suspended Wellington's role in alliance policymaking. Prime Minister Jacinta Ardern immediately responded to the AUKUS announcement by reaffirming that New Zealand ports would not be open to Australian nuclear submarines.<sup>27</sup> Australian critics saw the move to nuclear submarines as undermining Australia's claim to be part of the "Pacific family".<sup>28</sup>

### **The end of the regional unity?**

While ANZUS and related Western defense interests are trying to develop an effective collective security architecture that does not alienate the Pacific Islands and their concerns, the PIF states are presently struggling to maintain their own coherence. The PIF states have routinely acknowledged the importance of unity in order to achieve their broader security objectives including the sweeping claims of the Blue Pacific agenda. However, from mid-2020, events conspired to drive a wedge may well have ended the PIF as a unified association. At the time of writing this

winston-peters-new-zealand-pacific; Office of the Spokesperson, 'US engagement in the Pacific Islands: 2020 Pacific Pledge', fact sheet, State Department, US Government, October 1, 2020. <https://2017-2021.state.gov/u-s-engagement-in-the-pacific-islands-2020-pacific-pledge/index.html>.

26 Pacific Islands Forum, 'Boe Declaration on Regional Security', September 5, 2018, <https://www.forumsec.org/2018/09/05/boe-declaration-on-regional-security/>.

27 Ben McKay, "Australian nuclear subs not welcome in NZ", *Canberra Times*, September 16, 2021, <https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/7432973/australian-nuclear-subs-not-welcome-in-nz/>

28 Greg Fry, "AUKUS undermines Australia's 'Pacific family'", *Devpolicy Blog*, Australian National University, 4 November 2021, <https://devpolicy.org/aukus-undermines-australias-pacific-family-20211104/>

chapter, the denouement of these events has yet to be reached. However, whatever the outcome, the likelihood of a return to pre-2020 harmony appears remote. Thus, it is worthwhile to consider how the region reached a juncture where apparently there are issues more important than maintaining regional unity despite protestations to the contrary. What might be the consequences of the apparent fragility of the regional security architecture?

There is an argument that this PIF crisis could be laid at the door of the COVID-19 pandemic. Certainly, the pandemic has had an outsized influence on the personal cohesiveness of the PIF leadership but it was probably only the final straw or, perhaps, straws. The PIF's 2020 Leaders' Meeting was scheduled to decide on a successor to Secretary General Dame Meg Taylor. COVID-closed borders and related travel restrictions prevented the scheduled in-person PIF Leaders' Meeting from being hosted by Vanuatu. Despite some support for deferring a decision on Dame Meg's replacement, the Micronesian members managed to get support for a virtual Special Leaders' Retreat early in 2021 to make the appointment. Unlike the usual face-to-face Leaders' Retreats where difficulties are hammered out privately and without bureaucratic support, the February 2021 virtual meeting did not work on a consensus but rather by a majority vote.

There are several factors that contributed to the messy and unsatisfactory up-and-down vote for the new Secretary General. The five Micronesian members of PIF decided as early as September 2019 to nominate a consensus Micronesian candidate and, later in the same month, wrote a letter to inform the Chair of the PIF of this formally.<sup>29</sup> In addition to nominating Gerald Zackios, the Marshall Islands' ambassador to the US, the letter asserted strongly that it was Micronesia's sub-regional turn for the position. Following the cancelation of the August 2020 PIF Leaders' Meeting where the SG position was to have been decided, a special meeting of the Micronesian Presidents' Summit in Palau's capital, Koror, in October 2020 reaffirmed their support for Zackios. However, beyond pressing his candidature, the meeting made an ominous threat. The Presidents agreed that "in the 'Pacific Way', a 'Gentlemen's Agreement' is

29 Nic Maclellan, "Who Will Lead the Pacific Islands Forum?", *The Diplomat*, August 20, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/08/who-will-lead-the-pacific-islands-forum/>

an agreement, and if this agreement is not honored, then the Presidents would see no benefit to remaining in the PIF.”<sup>30</sup>

The sub-regional *démarche* was felt to be necessary as contrary to their collective expectation, three other candidates were nominated by other PIF members. The highest-profile candidate was former Cook Islands’ Prime Minister Henry Puna who resigned in September 2020 after a decade in power to stand for the PIF office.<sup>31</sup> Dr. Jimmie Rodgers, from the Solomon Islands, was well-credentialed having been a successful Director General of the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC). The Tongan economist Amelia Siamomua was nominated from her post in London as head of the Commonwealth Secretariat’s Gender section. Finally, Fiji advanced former foreign minister Ratu Inoke Kubuabola. It was a surprise move in that Fiji was due to host the 2021 PIF Leaders’ Meeting and so had a great deal riding on a successful summit. Indeed, Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama indicated that he wanted to invite the incoming US President, Joe Biden to attend.<sup>32</sup>

The Micronesian states expected to force the issue by insisting on a virtual Leaders’ Meeting where a vote would be taken if a consensus could not be reached. It was a brave but misconceived gamble as the Micronesians only had their five votes (FSM, Kiribati, Marshalls, Nauru and Palau), amongst the 18 expected for the 3 February 2021 meeting. After a failed attempt to find a consensus, Fiji pulled its candidate Ratu Inoke. This left three candidates on the ballot as the appointment went to a vote for the 17 participating PIF members. New Caledonia was unavailable.

Although the vote was secret, a credible Samoan media account reported that the first round gave Henry Puna 7 votes, Gerald Zackios 6, Jimmie Rodgers 3 and Amelia Siamomua 1.<sup>33</sup> It appears that the

30 Office of the President and Cabinet “Micronesian Presidents’ Summit Special Leaders’ Meeting 2020” press release, Marshall Islands, October 5, 2020, <https://rmigov.info/?p=1001>

31 “Cook Islands Prime Minister Henry Puna to stand down in September”, *nzherald.co.nz*, June 17, 2020, <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/world/cook-islands-prime-minister-henry-puna-to-stand-down-in-september/YTA3BGCFF2J17FDBT47OZ4JGCGM/>

32 Talebula Kate, “Bainimarama congratulates Biden; extends invitation to visit Fiji”, *The Fiji Times*, November 9, 2020, <https://www.fijitimes.com/bainimarama-congratulates-biden-extends-invitation-to-visit-fiji/>

33 “Forum Leaders Elect Former Prime Minister of Cook Islands as Secretary General of PIFS”, *Samoa Global News*, February 4, 2021, <https://samoaglobalnews.com/forum-leaders-elect-former-prime-minister-of-cook-islands-as-secretary-general-of-pifs/>

Polynesian members accounted for at least four of Puna's seven votes (Cook Islands, French Polynesia, Niue, and Samoa), with Tonga voting for its own candidate, Siamomua. It has been claimed privately that Fiji threw its support to Puna because Ratu Inoke had a close political relationship with Puna bringing in five of Puna's initial seven votes. The Micronesian bloc was solid delivering Zackios five of his six votes. It is accepted that Rodgers garnered the three available Melanesian votes (PNG, Solomons and Vanuatu).

Apportioning the other three votes in the first round are subject to conjecture. Private inquiries and public accusations suggest that Australia and New Zealand favored Puna and Tuvalu sided with the Zackios.<sup>34</sup> This distribution of first round votes gives a second-round vote that fits neatly with claims about the 4 votes that were re-allocated in the second round. Tonga and Vanuatu voted for Puna to give him the nine votes to win a narrow majority, while the other two Melanesian votes went to make up Zackios final total of eight. At the time of writing, the consequences of the vote are still being played out. The immediate reactions were dramatic but not quite as uniform as they looked in the rear-view mirror. Although the last Micronesian state to join the Forum, Palau was the first to declare it would carry out its threat to withdraw from the PIF. It added, for emphasis, that it would also close its mission to Suva.<sup>35</sup> David Kabua, President of the Marshall Islands, recognizing the gravity of the unfolding events, initially indicated that he wanted to review the RMI's engagement with the PIF rather than pulling out entirely.<sup>36</sup> Yet, less than a week after the ill-fated vote, the five Micronesian leaders issued a joint communique, stating that they were starting formal procedures to leave the Forum.<sup>37</sup>

Recognizing the depth of Micronesian anger, the rest of the PIF leadership set up a Political Dialogue mechanism in March 2021 to

34 Stephen Howes and Sadhana Sen, "Who blew up the Forum?", Devpolicy Blog, Australian National University March 5, 2021, <https://devpolicy.org/who-blew-up-the-forum-20210305>

35 Damien Cave, "Pacific Islands' Most Important Megaphone Falls Into Discard", *The New York Times*, February 5, 2021, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-02-09/five-micronesian-nations-set-to-quit-pacific-islands-forum/13133600>

36 Stephen Dziedzic, "Pacific Islands Forum future on the line at critical meeting of Micronesian leaders", ABC News, February 8, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/05/world/asia/pacific-islands-forum.html>

37 "Micronesian nations to quit Pacific's peak regional body, leaving it in disarray", Pacific Beat, ABC News, February 9, 2021, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-02-09/five-micro->

engage with the Micronesian leaders to pursue reconciliation. The Forum entrusted the dialogue to a leadership group known as the “Troika Plus.” The Troika is a leadership arrangement within the PIF composed of both the past and present PIF Secretaries General and the current PIF Chair. The “Plus” element involved the addition of leaders from Tuvalu, Nauru, Fiji, Papua New Guinea, and Samoa. The following month, at the end of April 2021, Fiji’s Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama, as Chair of the PIF, offered an unreserved apology to the Micronesian PIF member states with the hope it might start to heal the rift.<sup>38</sup> However, nothing was done to meet Micronesian demands that the vote be reversed. Due to COVID, the early August 2021 PIF’s annual Leaders’ Meeting was again held virtually. Nauru, a founding member of the PIF, was the only Micronesian state to attend which it did merely to express the group’s continuing unwillingness to remain in the PIF under the current conditions.<sup>39</sup> The PIF’s working party nevertheless was not disbanded and persists, it seems, with efforts to find a path to reconciliation

The Micronesian states immediately began carrying through with their threat to formally withdraw from the PIF. Palau was the first while Kiribati and Nauru had domestic processes that delayed their denunciations for some months. Nevertheless, the communique for the 20<sup>th</sup> Micronesian Presidents’ Summit (MPS) recorded in early September that all members have deposited “their letters of denunciation from the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat with the first withdrawal taking effect in February 2022.”<sup>40</sup> Just what these denunciations will achieve seems peculiarly uncertain. The February 2021 MPS Leaders Meeting communiqué asserted that all states would denounce the 2000 Agreement to Establishing the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat.<sup>41</sup> At the time that was the only relevant treaty.

nesian-nations-set-to-quit-pacific-islands-forum/13133600

38 Government Information Office “Micronesia receives unreserved apology from Forum”, Press Release, Republic of Nauru, April 27, 2021, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-02-09/five-micronesian-nations-set-to-quit-pacific-islands-forum/13133600>

39 “Micronesian leaders boycott Forum, stand firm on plan to leave bloc”, Asia Pacific Report, August 7, 2021. <https://asiapacificreport.nz/2021/08/07/micronesian-leaders-boycott-forum-stand-firm-on-plan-to-leave-bloc/>

40 “Naoero Communiqué”, 20th Micronesian Presidents’ Summit, 30th August to 2nd September 2021, Republic of Nauru, [http://naurugov.nr/media/149932/naoero\\_communique.pdf](http://naurugov.nr/media/149932/naoero_communique.pdf)

41 Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, Agreement Establishing the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat. 2000, <https://www.forumsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Agreement-Establishing-the-Pacific-Islands-Forum-Secretariat-2000.pdf>

However, on February 17, 2021, the Federated States of Micronesia's *note verbale*<sup>42</sup> denounced the 2005 Agreement Establishing the Pacific Islands Forum.<sup>43</sup> At the time, the 2005 treaty was not in force. Some weeks later, Fiji, the last state needed, brought this treaty into force by ratifying it. The August 2021 MPS communiqué strangely did not denounce the 2005 PIF Treaty that superseded the 2000 PIFS Treaty but continued to refer to the 2000 treaty.

The apparent confusion as to which treaty to denounce is only one of the peculiarities in the political confrontation between the Micronesian members and the rest of the PIF. As matters stand at the time of writing, the only clear resolution to the impasse appears to be for Henry Puna to surrender the office he won in the closely contested February 2021 virtual vote. In the unlikely event that this extreme concession was to be made, the scars within the PIF would not heal easily. The MPS leaders have indicated that they rated respect and collegial trust as more important than the Blue Pacific agenda or the objectives of the Boe Declaration. They even placed these above the privileged position they enjoyed with the PIF.

The MPS states have a significant force-multiplying influence within the PIF. The five presently constitute the majority in the influential eight-member smaller island states caucus within the PIF. This caucus has been an institutionally supported program unit since 2006. It was established specifically to target sustainable development in the smaller island states. With the help of this unit, the disaffected Micronesian states set most of the regional strategy for the smaller states, which has promoted their priorities on such issues as climate change, labor (mobility) and transportation. Whether the MPS as an autonomous agency could secure a similar level of international influence is problematic, especially if any aspect of the MPS agenda ran counter to the PIF agenda.

The question of institutional support has crossed the mind of the MPS leaders. Their 2021 Summit “acknowledged the importance of positioning the Micronesian subregion at the international level” and undertook work to formalize the legal status of the Micronesian Presidents’

42 Department of Foreign Affairs, *Note Verbale on the Denunciation of the Agreement Establishing the Pacific Islands Forum*, Federated States of Micronesia, [https://gov.fm/files/Note\\_Verbale\\_\\_Statement\\_of\\_Denunciation\\_February\\_17\\_2021.pdf](https://gov.fm/files/Note_Verbale__Statement_of_Denunciation_February_17_2021.pdf)

43 Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, *Agreement Establishing the Pacific Islands Forum, 2005*, <https://www.forumsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Agreement-Establishing-the-Pacific-Islands-Forum-Secretariat-2005-1.pdf>

Summit supported by its own secretariat.<sup>44</sup> It was agreed that Nauru would serve as the headquarters for the interim MPS secretariat. Depending on the size of the proposed secretariat, financial support could be an issue. Apart from the Parties to the Nauru Agreement (PNA), Pacific Island regional bodies depend heavily on non-Island sources of funding both for administrative and program activities. There is a hint that some in the MPS might be looking to the US to provide significant support.

Palau's President, Surangel Whipps Jr, appeared to argue for a stronger American accent in the PIF by including more US Pacific territories. Whipps sought to strengthen the Micronesia voice with the inclusion of Guam and the Northern Marianas, two US ethnically Micronesian territories, but he also suggested adding two Polynesian entities – American Samoa and the state of Hawaii.<sup>45</sup> Taking a swipe at Australia and New Zealand's influence in the PIF, Whipps argued that they had undermined the contribution the US could have made to the region. Had they supported Zackios, his "connections in Washington could have eased pathways for the (US) Pacific Deterrence Initiative and other funding to help the people of the whole region"<sup>46</sup> Whether Washington would want to contribute to the break-up of the PIF is questionable. However, should the MPS disaffiliate from the PIF, US strategic interests in this sub-regional grouping, the largest share of China's putative "second island chain," would be a difficult prize to ignore.<sup>47</sup>

The ultimate outcome of the sub-regional tensions within the PIF will not be resolved even by February 2022, when the first of the denunciations are due to take effect. Assuming the denunciations are valid, it will take some months for all five to come into force and then sometime after that for the financial obligations and administrative engagements to be worked through. Nevertheless, most of the time available since the

44 "Naoero Communiqué", 20th Micronesian Presidents' Summit, 30th August to 2nd September 2021, Republic of Nauru, [http://naurugov.nr/media/149932/naoero\\_communique.pdf](http://naurugov.nr/media/149932/naoero_communique.pdf)

45 Johnny Blades, "Pacific Forum's consensus failure lamented", Radio New Zealand News, February 14, 2021, <https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/436302/pacific-forum-s-consensus-failure-lamented>

46 Bernadette Carreon and Ben Doherty, "Future of Pacific Islands Forum in doubt as Palau walks out". *The Guardian*, February 5, 2021, <https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/436302/pacific-forum-s-consensus-failure-lamented>

47 A Erickson, J Wuthnow, 'Barriers, springboards and benchmarks: China conceptualizes the Pacific "island chains"', *The China Quarterly*, 2016, 225:1–22, doi:10.1017/S0305741016000011.

February 2021 MPS démarche has elapsed. Thus far, it does not appear that cooler counsel or diplomatic balm has successfully restored the pre-COVID regional balance. Whatever early 2022 brings, the Pacific Island regional security architecture will be bruised, if not broken. The capacity to agree on a regional approach to meeting the PIF's self-identified challenges of the new complex geo-political environment has been side-tracked and, quite possibly, significantly diverted.

## **Concluding Thoughts**

The challenges and opportunities of relations with China have dominated Pacific Island regional security and defense debates in the years since Xi Jinping became President of the PRC. The analysis of which perspective predominates has shifted as his leadership has become more assertive and Chinese military capacity more global. One of the more significant consequences for the Pacific Island region is the subtle appearance of a divide in perceptions of the distinctions regarding defense and security between the Island states and their traditional extra-regional security partners. The heightened defense concerns of regional partners like Australia, New Zealand and the US have elevated Island concerns for their security as strategic rivalry is seen as a threat. This alone would have put significant pressure on the region's security architecture. However, quite separately, the PIF states have thrown their own spanner into the works putting regional unity itself a risk.

The security-defense divide has always been a feature of the Pacific Island regional architecture, and indeed, arguably, it might have been a causal factor in the distinction. The Pacific Island experience with post-independence defense arrangements has been quite unlike that of the Caribbean island microstate region where national defense was part of the decolonization process. A significant reason for the muted role of defense in Pacific Island in the region's security architecture was a shared assumption that ANZUS (and related Western) defense policies were compatible with the Islands' security interests. During the Cold War, the ANZUS allies crafted a defense policy focused on containing the USSR that incorporated the Islands' human security priority on national development. The assumption that there is a basic compatibility of defense and security aims between Western and Island interests in the current era of strategic rivalry appears to be less easy to make today for two reasons. The PIF Island states are concerned that Western defense policies may adversely impact

their economic ties with China, an issue that did not arise in the case of the Soviet Union.

A second factor is the weakening of policy coherence within ANZUS from the mid-1980s New Zealand ban on nuclear ship visits which resulted in Washington's decision to end ANZUS Council meetings. The ANZUS alliance has the legacy of experience and intimacy with the regional states to serve as a sympathetic interlocutor on behalf of the Islands in the development of Indo-Pacific defense arrangements. However, the ANZUS alliance appears not to be entirely on the same page regarding relations with the PRC or the risks of China's influence in the region. The AUKUS agreement has added to the division within ANZUS states and apparently pushed the alliance member most closely aligned with Island security thinking further to the sidelines of regional defense policy. However, without something like a general ANZUS commitment ensuring Indo-Pacific defense policy respects the Islands' concerns, PIF fears about being marginalized appear apt to be realized.

These circumstances have put a premium on maintaining the unity of purpose and objective of the PIF states in the face of the current strategic challenges. The deep fracture that has emerged over the organizational leadership of the PIF legitimately calls into question the member states commitment to their expressed security aims as expressed in the Boe Declaration and the Blue Pacific agenda. If the collapse of the PIF is avoided, it is possible that regional unity will be recovered over time but perhaps not fully. On the other hand, if the PIF does bifurcate along subregional lines, the security consequences could be quite significant. Dame Meg's prediction that the division would be exploited for strategic advantage seems unavoidable. The Micronesian sub-region comprises key elements of the strategically important second island chain. The American defense investment in Palau, along with the existing facilities in Guam and the Northern Marianas, would have a significant influence on the defense and the security posture of the newly autonomous sub-regional association.

For all the potential missteps that endanger regional unity as the key element of regional security architecture, a final note of optimism is in order. An argument should be made that there is an underlying robustness to the regional architecture that will maintain its security interests even if the PIF collapses. Should the PIF be reduced back to a South Pacific membership, this would not necessarily undermine entirely collective support within the region for the human security objectives of the Boe Declaration. The Pacific Community is the oldest, most comprehensive

and best resourced of the Pacific Island regional organizations. In addition to including all the region's states and territories, Australia, France, New Zealand and the US are full members while the UK also maintains some connection. The SPC does not have the political mandate to create a security policy framework such as the Boe Declaration. Nevertheless, it has the technical mandate and the expertise to provide its key deliverables. Moreover, the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP) also has a comprehensive regional membership to pursue the climate change agenda. The Forum Fisheries Agency and the Parties to the Nauru Agreement will continue to unite the Island states on sustainable marine resource protection. Thus, the region would be the poorer if the PIF does fracture but it would not be entirely bereft.