



## Options Paper

# What does it look like for Australia to... Support Pacific Regionalism

**SUPPORTED BY**



**Australian Government**  
**Australian Civil-Military Centre**

# Executive Summary



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The Pacific matters to Australia's security and national interests. With much of its population located along the Pacific coastline, Australia has a Pacific identity and a central role in Pacific regionalism.

Cooperation among Pacific countries is key to addressing shared challenges and capitalising on shared opportunities. Pacific regionalism is how collective priorities are developed, agreed and delivered.

While there are many areas where Pacific Island countries disagree, at the regional level there are shared interests in areas such as trade, fisheries, climate change and ocean boundaries. The Pacific Islands Forum's 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent sets out a common strategic, cultural and philosophical vision for the Pacific to work together as a region.

In an era of rapid geopolitical change, there are forces that will impact on Pacific regionalism. The brief withdrawal of Micronesian states from the Pacific Islands Forum illustrates that sudden change – and a retreat from regionalism – are possible.

Australia should plan for and be ready to respond to developments in Pacific regionalism. Potential models include EU-style integration of digital and labour markets or an ASEAN-style mechanism to manage geopolitical conflict.

Consultations with more than 50 experts from Australia and the Pacific revealed a desire for Australia to play an enabling role and contribute to regionalism as a member of the Pacific.

Pacific experts believe that there remains an enduring political commitment to regionalism among Pacific Island countries, despite the significant impact of geostrategic dynamics. Substantive regional policy frameworks have been developed, but there are underlying barriers for Pacific Island countries in translating these regional aims into national plans. These include finance, transport, infrastructure, technical knowledge, poor governance, corruption and geographic isolation. Consultations revealed a desire for Australia to work with Pacific Island countries to prioritise identified areas of shared interest and work with them to overcome barriers to implementation.

Australian experts suggested that a commitment to Pacific regionalism is an imperative, with a strong sense of regionalism paying a significant security dividend for Australia. Consultees suggested that cooperation relies on the ability of each nation to see itself within a regional framework. Achieving this requires developing bonds of affinity across national boundaries and a willingness to prioritise shared interests.

There was a perception among some consultees that Australia has a different sense of identity and purpose that can situate it as more of a partner to the Pacific region, rather than a fully integrated member. Although Australia has demonstrated a commitment to Pacific institutions, and a desire to be a helpful partner, it may see itself – and be seen – as distinct. It was noted that climate change – an issue that the region deems existential – has not been viewed with the same urgency by Australia.

Barriers include:

- Australia's wide, extra-regional interests
- Australia's size and economic power relative to other Pacific countries
- Australia's ability to establish separate regional arrangements
- Differing agendas and priorities, especially on climate change.

Pacific regionalism rests on the identification of commonalities – key priorities shared across the region – that can serve as a foundation to build a sense of solidarity.

There are opportunities for Australia to build on a range of common interests such as sustainable fisheries and disaster response capacity that are of mutual concern to all Pacific countries.

Commonalities also come with the flourishing of informal linkages. Diaspora, sporting, religious, academic and issue-based groups play a central role in forging a strong sense of regional affinity.

# Why it Matters

Australia's standing as a larger power and with greater resources brings with it responsibilities. Its commitment to Pacific regionalism should be demonstrated through how it approaches these responsibilities and how it commits itself to enhancing regional development. This should be reflected not only in dollar terms, but also in the posture and style of Australia's engagement.

This paper suggests the following **pathways for Australia to support Pacific regionalism**:

- Continue to provide support to the Pacific Islands Forum to implement the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent
- Support the Pacific Islands Forum to consider creating a more institutionalised process for facilitating geopolitical conversations, potentially along the lines of the ASEAN Regional Forum
- Support strengthening the coordination of development assistance and progressing more formalised development structures within the Pacific Islands Forum, for example by reviving the Cairns Compact or a similar mechanism
- Continue to build regional disaster response capability where countries collectively contribute to each other's security
- Use a successful joint Australia-Pacific bid for COP31 to advance the ideals of Blue Pacific Strategy globally and within Australian policy

**“An expression of a common sense of identity and purpose, leading progressively to the sharing of institutions, resources and markets, with the purpose of complementing national efforts, overcoming common constraints, and enhancing sustainable and inclusive development within Pacific countries and territories and for the Pacific region as a whole.”**

*Framework for Pacific Regionalism as endorsed by Pacific Islands Forum Leaders in July 2014*

The Pacific Islands – comprising the sub-regions of Micronesia, Melanesia, and Polynesia – will always be an area of great strategic significance for Australia. Peace and stability in the Pacific contribute to Australia's security and national interest.<sup>1</sup>

Pacific regionalism is cooperation on the geographic, political, developmental and cultural space of the Pacific. It is the way sovereign states and territories in the Pacific work together – and with key partners – to address shared challenges and capitalise on shared opportunities. It is how collective priorities are developed, agreed and delivered.

At the political apex of the region's architecture is the 18-member Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), complemented by a range of regional technical and sectoral agencies, global multilateral agencies, civil society and private sector groupings.<sup>2</sup> Australia is a founding member of the Forum.

Despite their many differences in national interests and objectives – which cannot be papered over – the Pacific member countries do look to convene as a collective, and to use regionalism as a tool to advocate for issues at the global level.

Although Pacific regionalism falls short of surrendering sovereignty to supra-national institutions or establishing a free trade area like the European Union, there is an expectation that tangible results will emerge from regionalism.

In recent years, Pacific regionalism has been advanced through the development of a common strategic, cultural and philosophical vision of the Blue Pacific Continent. This concept recognises that the Pacific Ocean and its island nations are an interconnected region that, despite its great cultural and linguistic diversity, are united by a shared geography and understanding of the world as island states.

Pivotal to this is an appreciation of their role as custodians of the Pacific Ocean, and a reframing of Pacific Island nations themselves as “large ocean states”, rather than “small island states”.

**“Australia's priority is to ensure the Blue Pacific remains peaceful, prosperous and equipped to respond to the challenges of our time. At every step, we will work together on shared regional interests, respond to Pacific priorities, and respect Pacific institutions.”**

*2023-24 Development Budget Summary*

**“A stable, secure, resilient and prosperous Pacific region is in Australia's national interest. Australia's diplomatic engagement through regional organisations complements our bilateral relationships in the Pacific.”**

*Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade website*

**“Regional architecture such as ASEAN and the Pacific Islands Forum, and their associated forums, remain critical to Australian engagement in the region. Australia's refocus will continue to rely on such forums as reliable avenues to jointly engage partners at a regional level.”**

*Defence Strategic Review*

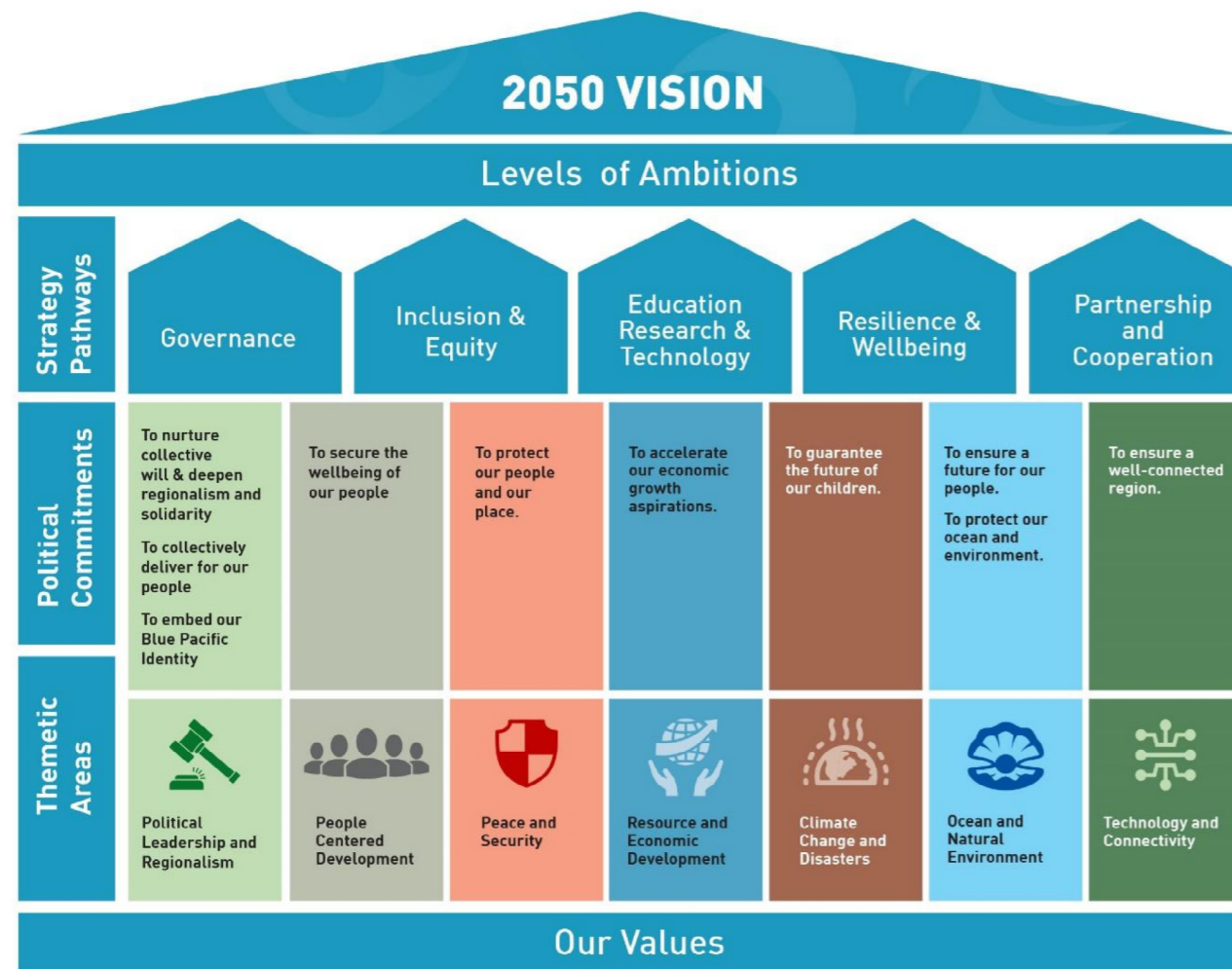
1 Asia-Pacific Development, Diplomacy & Defence Dialogue, *Australia and the Pacific: Shaping a Shared Future*, June 2022: <https://asiapacific4d.com/idea/synthesis-report/>

2 Joanne Wallis, Henrietta McNeill, James Batley and Anna Powles, Mapping Security Cooperation in the Pacific Islands, *ANU Department of Pacific Affairs*, 2021: [https://dpa.bellschool.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/publications/attachments/2021-06/mapping\\_security\\_cooperation\\_in\\_pacific\\_islands\\_dpa\\_research\\_report\\_2021\\_joanne\\_wallis\\_henrietta\\_mcneill\\_james\\_batley\\_anna\\_powles.pdf](https://dpa.bellschool.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/publications/attachments/2021-06/mapping_security_cooperation_in_pacific_islands_dpa_research_report_2021_joanne_wallis_henrietta_mcneill_james_batley_anna_powles.pdf)

## 2050 STRATEGY FOR THE BLUE PACIFIC CONTINENT

Building on the Blue Pacific concept endorsed by the Pacific Island Forum in 2017, the 2050 Strategy<sup>3</sup> sets out a long-term approach for the countries and territories, communities and people of the Pacific to work together as a region. It arose out of an increased urgency for the region to act collectively on issues of significance, including health epidemics, climate change and disaster risk, gender equality, regional security, ocean governance, and economic development.

The Strategy recognises that this will require a whole-of-region approach, with the inclusion of all key stakeholders and all levels of society in supporting and delivering on shared priorities. It seeks broad support across the region to ensure full ownership and accountability in delivering on shared objectives to secure long-term wellbeing and prosperity.<sup>4</sup>



<sup>3</sup> Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent, 2022: <https://forumsec.org/sites/default/files/2023-11/PIFS-2050-Strategy-Blue-Pacific-Continent-WEB-5Aug2022-1.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2050 Strategy Implementation Plan 2023-2030: Phase I - 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent, 2023: [https://forumsec.org/sites/default/files/2024-03/2050-Strategy-Implementation-Plan\\_2023-2030.pdf](https://forumsec.org/sites/default/files/2024-03/2050-Strategy-Implementation-Plan_2023-2030.pdf)

From this language and sentiment flows a deep sense of responsibility towards the Pacific Ocean and its island nations. It is from this base that Pacific Island nations have been able to project influence as a diplomatic bloc in global affairs. It has provided the region with the credibility to lead on issues of both regional and global significance, such as nuclear disarmament and climate change.<sup>5</sup>

To date, Pacific regionalism has had an emphasis on the maintenance of sovereignty. Pacific countries are free to utilise bilateral and multilateral mechanisms to advance their objectives in addition to regionalism.

Pacific regional architecture has remained relatively constant and with little indication of a desire to push towards greater integration. The last major change was the inclusion of the non-sovereign semi-autonomous territories of New Caledonia and French Polynesia as full members in 2016. There have been some incremental changes to processes, such as greater inclusion of civil society and the private sector in consultation.

Research on how security cooperation in the Pacific Islands is achieved shows a patchwork of formal and informal bilateral, minilateral and multilateral agencies, agreements and arrangements, across local, national, regional and international levels rather than a security community.<sup>6</sup>

In an era of rapid geopolitical change, there are forces that will impact on Pacific regionalism.

<sup>5</sup> Tess Newton Cain and Wesley Morgan, Strengthening Australia's relationships with countries in the Pacific region, Griffith Asia Institute, June 2020: [https://www.griffith.edu.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0026/1093427/strengthening-australias-pacific-relationship-policy-brief.pdf](https://www.griffith.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0026/1093427/strengthening-australias-pacific-relationship-policy-brief.pdf); Greg Fry, *Framing the Islands: Power and Diplomatic Agency in Pacific Regionalism* (Canberra: ANU Press): pp.310-311; Wesley Morgan, Large Ocean States: Pacific Regionalism and Climate Security in a New Era of Geostrategic Competition, East Asia (39), 2021: pp. 45-62.

<sup>6</sup> Joanne Wallis, Henrietta McNeill, James Batley and Anna Powles, Mapping Security Cooperation in the Pacific Islands, *AUN Department of Pacific Affairs*, 2021: [https://dpa.bellschool.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/publications/attachments/2021-06/mapping\\_security\\_cooperation\\_in\\_pacific\\_islands\\_dpa\\_research\\_report\\_2021\\_joanne\\_wallis\\_henrietta\\_mcneill\\_james\\_batley\\_anna\\_powles.pdf](https://dpa.bellschool.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/publications/attachments/2021-06/mapping_security_cooperation_in_pacific_islands_dpa_research_report_2021_joanne_wallis_henrietta_mcneill_james_batley_anna_powles.pdf)

**“As Pacific Leaders, our vision is for a resilient Pacific Region of peace, harmony, security, social inclusion and prosperity, that ensures all Pacific peoples can lead free, healthy and productive lives.”**

*2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent*

**“Our ambition is for a region where all Pacific peoples benefit from our Forum Leaders working together to safeguard, secure, and progress the Blue Pacific Continent. Where we achieve regional priorities through a united and cohesive political leadership supported by the Pacific Islands Forum and a responsive regional architecture that aligns to the region’s priorities and values.”**

*Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat website*

**“[There is an] inseparable link between our ocean, seas, and Pacific Island peoples: their values, traditional practices and spiritual connections.”**

*Samoan Prime Minister Tuila’epa Sa’ilele Malielegaoi at United Nations Oceans Conference, June 2017*

For example, new economic opportunities from mining seabed resources pose a threat to regional unity. The market for critical minerals makes deep seabed mining an enticing economic prospect. But scientific research raises concerns about potential environmental impacts of the process and its effects on marine life.<sup>7</sup> Pursuing such resource extraction would likely create significant schisms within PIF.<sup>8</sup>

The intensification of geopolitical competition in the Pacific also impacts on the process of regional integration.<sup>9</sup> Increased competition provides the Pacific with a platform enabling individual nations and the region as a whole to have a greater voice and influence on international affairs. More attention on the Pacific means greater resources to address development issues, but this assistance often also comes with complications as new sets of interests emerge for states.

While Australia is a critical partner, its assistance is often insufficient for the requirements of the region. This leads Pacific Island countries to look towards other countries like China or Japan to assist with these resource challenges. Often Australia's development assistance is tied to good governance, the rule of law and human rights; this presents opportunities for countries that have no such conditions.

The nature of China's support also comes with pressures, including the ending of a traditional and culturally important relationship with Taiwan for several Pacific states.<sup>10</sup> The balancing of opportunities and risks is an issue for each individual state to assess, but also one that has ramifications for the harmony of regional institutions and relationships.

Looking forward, there are three potential scenarios for the development of Pacific regionalism:

- The region maintains its current path/status quo (ie pragmatic, piecemeal, rational)
- The region retreats from Pacific regionalism (ie increasing nationalism or sub-regionalism)
- The region pursues an intentional deepened regionalism.

The brief withdrawal and subsequent return to PIF of Micronesian states in 2021 and 2022 illustrates that sudden changes are possible.<sup>11</sup>

Australia should be ready to plan for and respond to these developments.

**“Australia’s partnership with the Pacific is longstanding. The Pacific Islands Forum is the heart of Pacific regionalism – and Australia is a proud founding member. A strong, united Pacific Islands Forum is vital to protecting our shared interests in a peaceful, prosperous and resilient region and to addressing the pressing challenges our region faces.”**

*Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, Pacific Islands Forum Leaders’ Meeting, 12 July 2022*

**“We feel a profound sense of kinship with the Pacific, of wanting to connect with the Pacific as part of one family. We have longstanding bonds forged in times of crisis but sustained in peace and in prosperity.”**

*Minister for Foreign Affairs Penny Wong, Speech to the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 26 May 2022*

**“[W]e’re obviously, as Australians, part of the Pacific Island region and we’re keen to work with all of our Pacific members of the family to secure our regional security, and that’s our key focus.”**

*Minister for International Development and the Pacific and Minister for Defence Industry Pat Conroy, 7 June 2022*

7 Oliver Ashford, Jonathan Baines, Melissa Barbanell and Ke Wang, What We Know About Deep-sea Mining — and What We Don't, *World Resources Institute*, 23 February 2024: <https://www.wri.org/insights/deep-sea-mining-explained>

8 Daniel Hurst, Here be nodules: will deep-sea mineral riches divide the Pacific family?, *The Guardian*, 10 November 2023: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/nov/10/pacific-islands-forum-deep-sea-mining-harm-risks>

9 Dame Meg Taylor, Pacific-led Regionalism Undermined, *Asia Society Policy Institute*, 25 September 2023: <https://asiasociety.org/policy-institute/pacific-led-regionalism-undermined>

10 Grant Wyeth, Taiwan and the Pacific: One Big, Happy Austronesian Family, *The Diplomat*, 9 January 2019: <https://thediplomat.com/2019/01/taiwan-and-the-pacific-one-big-happy-austronesian-family/>

11 The resolution has been interpreted as showing an enduring commitment to Pacific regionalism, with the controversy about a perception of fairness within PIF rather than a problem with regionalism itself. Eva U Wagner, Pacific Islands Forum – Regional Solidarity Restored, For Now, *Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Periscope*, June 2022: <https://periscopekasaustralia.com.au/pacific-islands-forum-regional-solidarity-restored-for-now/>

## CURRENT DEBATES

In the past year experts have proposed different models for how Australia should approach and engage with Pacific regionalism.



### European Union integration as a model<sup>12</sup>

Hervé Lemahieu has advocated that Australia lead on two Pacific Islands Forum (PIF)–endorsed initiatives: the creation of a digital single market for the Pacific and a phased expansion of the Trans-Tasman free travel area. Just as Germany has powered European integration while leading from behind on European diplomacy, so too could Australia for the Pacific Islands region.

Lemahieu considers Australia to have a unique ability to unleash its own “Brussels effect” in the Pacific, shaping the region through its market size and regulatory standards. This would require that it commit to – and progressively ease barriers on – the free movement of data, capital and people across the Blue Pacific Continent.

He suggests that Australia, New Zealand and their Pacific partners would have much to gain from pooling their telecommunication sectors to bridge the region’s great digital divide. The ultimate aim of this model would be to collapse geographic barriers by drastically lowering the costs of cross-border transfers of data and capital.

The idea is that this would pave the way for the most significant form of PIF integration possible: an EU-style common travel area for the Pacific. Much as five European countries forged the Schengen Agreement of 1985, Australia and New Zealand – together with the three other PIF countries involved in the Trans-Tasman corridor – could merge several arrangements by establishing a treaty for the creation and expansion of a Pacific common travel area.

A digital single market and a common travel area would represent the most innovative forms of regional integration ever attempted in the Pacific, with the potential to boost national incomes through increased labour mobility and remittance flows, advance the region’s collective response to climate change, and spur reforms that would strengthen government capacity and regional security.

### The Association of Southeast Asian Nations as a model<sup>13</sup>

Joanne Wallis and Anna Powles have proposed that Australia, along with New Zealand and the United States, help build a forum for Pacific Island nations to discuss security matters and manage geopolitical challenges.

One recommendation from their recent report is that Pacific Island Forum (PIF) leaders consider creating a Pacific Regional Forum – based on the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) model – that builds on existing regional arrangements. While the current PIF Dialogue Partners mechanism facilitates dialogue and engagement between partners and PIF members, it does not currently have the expansive mandate of the ARF; nor is it supported by the same institutional architecture.

Wallis and Powles argue that there is scope to support the creation of a mechanism like the ARF in the Pacific, including by providing funding to PIF to provide institutional support and logistical support to enable members’ participation.

Acknowledging that the region is weary of calls to develop new regional arrangements, this mechanism could build on existing ones. Expanding and institutionalising the Forum Dialogue Partner mechanism to facilitate engagement with non-PIF partners on geopolitical matters and confidence building would appear to be the most straightforward route. The key to its success would be elevating the level of participants in this mechanism. This could include at foreign minister–level meeting akin to the ARF to embed PIF centrality in geopolitical debates about the region.

### Regional and multilateral engagement as a model<sup>14</sup>

Identifying how competition for influence through bilateral development assistance in the Pacific can put good governance, transparency and regional unity at risk, a recent report from Meg Keen and Alan Tidwell outlines the nature of current geopolitical competition and proposes regional and multilateral engagement initiatives to advance regional resilience and meet Western strategic objectives.

They suggest Australia focus on working with multilateral and regional bodies to raise the bar on development engagement and better respond to Pacific priorities. Regional agencies are not a panacea; regional engagement and rule compliance are mostly optional, and at times national interests will be best served by building bilateral relations and gaining recognition through clear national branding. Collaboration costs can be considerable, so returns must also be high.

But regional cooperation is a powerful counterpart to bilateral efforts when goals are shared, systems complementary, and resources scarce. It is one tool of statecraft that can extend reach and influence in a region of intensifying geostrategic competition and growing development needs. Regional and multilateral agencies offer a space where diverse donors and recipients interact to achieve development goals and set regional norms. These institutions can, at their best, shape and lift development practice.

Bilateral arrangements will continue to dominate the Pacific Islands’ aid landscape and will remain open to politicisation. But regional and multilateral agencies provide a tool to improve development engagement and showcase the value of strengthened approaches to finance and development support. Pacific Islands’ leaders and institutions hold the keys to addressing their desire for greater cooperation.

<sup>12</sup> Hervé Lemahieu, The Fix: How Australia Can Unleash Its Own “Brussels Effect” in the Pacific Island Region, *Australian Foreign Affairs*, February 2024: <https://www.australianforeignaffairs.com/afa/the-fix-solving-australias-foreign-affairs-challenges/3085>

<sup>13</sup> Joanne Wallis and Anna Powles, Smooth sailing? Australia, New Zealand and the United States partnering in—and with—the Pacific islands, *Australian Strategic Policy Institute*, May 2023: <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/smooth-sailing>

<sup>14</sup> Meg Keen and Alan Tidwell, Geopolitics in the Pacific Islands: Playing for advantage, *Lowy Institute*, January 2024: <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/geopolitics-pacific-islands-playing-advantage>

# Perspectives on Pacific Regionalism

This paper is the culmination of four months of consultations with more than 50 experts from Australia and the Pacific.

The process commenced with a dialogue event in February 2024 and was led by a working group of experts drawn from academia, public policy and the non-government sector. AP4D also gathered perspectives from smaller group and individual consultations. This paper is a synthesis of these contributions.

AP4D is grateful to those who have contributed to the development of this paper. Views expressed here cannot be attributed to any individuals or organisations involved in the process.

A full list of individuals and organisations consulted can be found at the end of the paper.

## PACIFIC

Pacific regionalism existed before the formation of the Pacific Islands Forum and before the creation of modern states. There are deep historical and cultural connections throughout the region that both drive and complement modern institutional arrangements.<sup>15</sup>

While there are many areas where Pacific Island countries disagree, at the regional level there are shared interests in areas such as trade, fisheries, climate change, cultural exchange, planned urbanisation and ocean boundaries. For five decades, Pacific countries have used regionalism as a vehicle to promote development and security.<sup>16</sup>

Consultations suggested that there remains an enduring political commitment to Pacific regionalism among Pacific Island countries. Substantive regional policy frameworks have been developed (although translation and delivery at a national level remains a work in progress). This is despite the significant impact that geopolitical and geostrategic dynamics have had and continue to have.

The region's architecture has remained relatively constant, with a preference among members for incremental change rather than fundamental reform. Yet numerous challenges persist, including risks associated with climate change and economic underdevelopment.

This has led to calls for a deeper and more intentional approach to Pacific regionalism (which may not follow the same path to political integration as has been the case in other regions, for example the formation of the European Union).<sup>17</sup>

Any efforts to enhance Pacific regionalism must be informed and driven by context and must generate benefit for members and the peoples of the Pacific. It requires:

- Political settlement on the pace and scale of change and prioritisation
- Integrated policy formulation and implementation that is linked to this approach
- Enabling and supportive regional architecture

There are underlying barriers and challenges for Pacific Island countries in translating broader regional aims into national plans and then implementing them. These include finance, transport, infrastructure, technical knowledge, poor governance and corruption, as well as geographic isolation.

Many Pacific Island countries have a small tax base preventing them from raising the revenue necessary to fund many priorities. The high cost of transportation creates an impediment to integration, with the movement of goods, services and people across the region often exorbitant.<sup>18</sup> There is a great divide in access to information and communications technology (ICT) for digital transformation.<sup>19</sup>

Consultations revealed a desire for Australia to play a greater enabling role by working with Pacific countries to prioritise identified areas of shared interest and work with them to overcome barriers to implementing projects and programmes in a sustainable way.

Among some consultees there remains a perception that Australia is more of a partner to the Pacific region, rather than a fully integrated member. Factors include Australia's wide, extra-regional interests, and its size and economic power relative to other Pacific Island countries. It was noted that climate change – an issue that the region deems existential – has not been viewed with the same urgency by Australia.<sup>20</sup>

One consultee expressed the view that Pacific Islanders interact differently with Australians than with those from other Pacific Island nations. It was suggested that enhancing this closeness could come through building stronger links with First Nations Australians, to whom Pacific Islanders feel a sense of affinity.<sup>21</sup>

**“After all, Pacific regionalism is first and foremost about the countries and the territories of the Pacific working together for the purpose of achieving more effective results and impacts at the national and community levels.”**

*Prime Minister of Tonga Hu'akavameiliku at the Launching of the Theme of the 53rd Pacific Islands Forum, 11 April 2024*

**“The euphoria of independence of the Pacific island states between 1960 and 1980 naturally created the need for a unifying ideology to provide a platform on which they could articulate a common voice and deal with the rigors of global politics, trade, and manage a collective regional agenda.”**

*Steven Ratuva, How Pacific Regionalism Fell Apart, 1 August 2021*

**“We will bring First Nations' voices to our Pacific engagement and further deepen our partnerships to achieve our shared vision of a peaceful, prosperous and resilient region.”**

*2023-24 Development Budget Summary*

15 Oceanic diplomacy, ANU Department of Pacific Affairs, <https://bellschool.anu.edu.au/dpa/our-research-dpa/oceanic-diplomacy>

16 Denghua Zhang and Walter Diamana, Pacific Regionalism: Opportunities and Challenges, 22 November 2021

17 Adapted from a presentation by Joel Nilon, former Policy Adviser at the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, to the ANU Department of Pacific Affairs on 22 Feb 2024.

18 Asia-Pacific Development, Diplomacy & Defence Dialogue, *What does it look like for Australia to be a Partner on Maritime Safety with the Pacific*, August 2023: <https://asiapacific4d.com/idea/pacific-maritime-safety/>

19 Asia-Pacific Development, Diplomacy & Defence Dialogue, *What does it look like for Australia to be a Partner on Digital Resilience and Transformation in the Pacific*, June 2022: <https://asiapacific4d.com/idea/digital-resilience-and-transformation/>

20 Climate Council, *The Lost Years: Counting the costs of climate inaction in Australia*, 31 March 2022: <https://www.climatecouncil.org.au/resources/lost-years-counting-costs-climate-inaction-in-australia/>

21 Asia-Pacific Development, Diplomacy & Defence Dialogue, *Values of First Nations Australians and Pacific connections – A NAIDOC Week panel discussion*, 7 July 2023: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=01T2ln7aZmw>

People-to-people connections were identified as the vector that allows Australia and the Pacific communities to forge bonds and develop capacity together. Consultees shared the view that this is not currently happening to the extent it could. The trend for Australian personnel to undertake short-term “capacity building” visits does not lend itself to genuine relationship-building or deep cultural understanding. Similarly, even when young, inexperienced Australians do stay for longer, they may not get on with accomplished local experts at the top of their field.

Improving cultural literacy and understanding is an ongoing process that stems from genuine relationships, built consistently over time. There are opportunities to harness the networks, relationships and cross-cultural literacy of Australia’s strong Pacific diaspora in policy and decision-making.

Consultees considered that Australia sees itself as more than an advisor or a contributor to regional institutional arrangements, but as striving towards greater integration into the region’s history and culture. This involves thinking about “how can Australia contribute as a member of the Pacific?” rather than “how can Australia help the Pacific?”.

**“It is no secret that the Pacific Islands Forum has faced some of the more complex challenges of its history in recent years. But, true to our resilient values, and founded on our traditional ways and customs, we have emerged from these challenges reaffirming our commitment to regionalism and our collective advocacy and actions.”**

*Cook Islands Prime Minister Mark Brown at Ocean Nations 3rd Annual Indo-Pacific Dialogue, 20 September 2023*

#### Whitlam Institute Pacific Perspectives on the World 2020<sup>22</sup>

Three key messages emerged from focus groups and interviews with 150 Pacific Islanders from varying backgrounds:

- The quality of Australia’s relationships matter more than the quantity of its aid or trade;
- Australia’s values, norms and ways of doing things are a vital part of how it conducts its engagement with the Pacific;
- Australia is valued but it is one of many partners for Pacific Islanders.

Pacific people are looking for reassurance that Australia shares their concerns and is working alongside them, as an equal partner, to address shared challenges.

#### Pacific Attitudes Survey<sup>23</sup>

Pacific Attitudes Surveys in 2022-3 found that:

- 92% of Samoan respondents identified Australia as having a positive influence on Samoa (second behind New Zealand at 95%)
- 96% of Vanuatu respondents identified Australia as having a positive influence on Vanuatu, ahead of New Zealand (91%), China (90%), France (87%) and the United States (81%)

#### 2000 Biketawa Declaration<sup>24</sup>

At the 31st Summit of Pacific Islands Forum Leaders held in Kiribati in October 2000, all members committed to seven core values:

- Commitment to good governance which is the exercise of authority (leadership) and interactions in a manner that is open, transparent, accountable, participatory, consultative and decisive but fair and equitable.
- Belief in the liberty of the individual under the law, in equal rights for all citizens regardless of gender, race, colour, creed or political belief and in the individual’s inalienable right to participate by means of free and democratic political process in framing the society in which he or she lives.
- Upholding democratic processes and institutions which reflect national and local circumstances, including the peaceful transfer of power, the rule of law and the independence of the judiciary, just and honest government.
- Recognising the importance and urgency of equitable economic, social and cultural development to satisfy the basic needs and aspirations of the peoples of the Forum.
- Recognising the importance of respecting and protecting indigenous rights and cultural values, traditions and customs.
- Recognising the vulnerability of member countries to threats to their security, broadly defined, and the importance of cooperation among members in dealing with such threats when they arise.
- Recognising the importance of averting the causes of conflict and of reducing, containing and resolving all conflicts by peaceful means including by customary practices.

22 Tess Newton Cain, James Cox and Dr Geir Henning Presterudstuen, Pacific Perspectives on the World, Listening to Australia’s island neighbours in order to build strong, respectful and sustainable relationships, *Whitlam Institute*, February 2020: <https://www.whitlam.org/publications/2020/2/13/pacific-perspectives-on-the-world>

23 Michael Leach et al, Pacific Attitudes Survey: Samoa, *Australian National University*, April 2022: <https://dspace-prod.anu.edu.au/server/api/core/bitstreams/38a0ec49-a8ed-4e65-8672-a67d5e059915/content>

24 Pacific Islands Forum, “Biketawa Declaration”, Kiribati, 2000, <https://pacificsecurity.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Biketawa-Declaration.pdf>



## AUSTRALIA

As a Pacific country, with much of its population located along its Pacific coastline, Australia has a Pacific identity and a role in Pacific regionalism. Consultees noted that Australia and the Pacific Islands share Indigenous histories and identities, experiences of colonialism and myriad historical and current trade, social, strategic and cultural links. At the same time Australia and New Zealand are distinct within the region by virtue of their size and dominant European cultural heritage.

Consultations suggested that a commitment to the region is an imperative for Australia because a strong sense of regionalism pays a significant security dividend. Over the past decade there has been a significant change in the strategic environment within the Pacific as it has navigated a series of extraordinary new challenges with local, regional and global consequences:

- The effects/impacts of climate change and natural disasters;
- Broader environmental issues (including nuclear power and seabed mining);
- Patchy progress on sustainable development goals;
- Urbanisation and the problem of how to manage the impact of that growth;
- The disruption and ongoing consequences of COVID-19;
- Global inflation;
- Increased security risks including transnational crime;
- Debates around the connection between human rights, international law and conflict prevention to regional security;
- Impacts of new technologies including social media and artificial intelligence;
- Generational leadership transition;
- Strengthening sub-regionalism;
- Increased geopolitical competition and the emergence of new partners in the region;
- Growing authoritarianism globally

Each of these challenges cuts across sectors, national boundaries and national and regional interests.

While national interests are often understood in a narrow sense – or in competition with other states – for these life-shaping transnational issues, national interests require significant regional cooperation.

Regional cooperation provides a platform of resilience for the region to burden-share and to enhance responses through collective knowledge. It also provides a platform from which to advocate collectively for a greater flow of resources from outside the region.

Consultees suggested that this platform of cooperation relies on the ability of each nation within the Pacific to see itself within a regional framework that includes the other nations of the region. Achieving this requires developing bonds of affinity and empathy across national boundaries and an understanding of how developments in one country impact on the region as a whole. It also requires a willingness to prioritise shared interests.

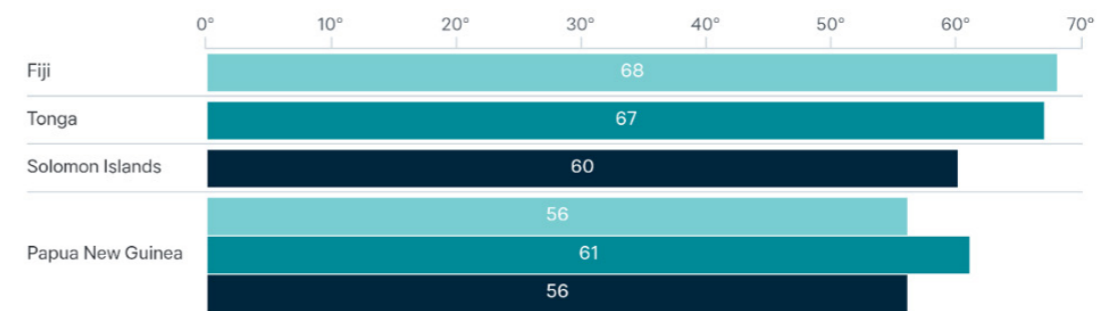
There was a perception among some consultees that Australia has a different sense of identity and purpose that can situate it as an outsider within the Pacific Islands Forum. Although Australia has demonstrated a commitment to Pacific institutions, and a desire to be a helpful partner, it may see itself – and be seen – as distinct from the region. This is compounded by positions it has committed itself to – like the expanded concept of environmental security within the Boe Declaration – which seems at odds with the country's economic interests in fossil fuels.<sup>25</sup>

Consultees noted that Australia has recently adjusted its interaction with Pacific Island countries based on geopolitical developments. This is understandable but can undermine the perception of genuine commitment.

It was noted that Australia's standing as a larger power and with greater resources brings with it responsibilities. Its commitment to Pacific regionalism should be demonstrated through how it approaches these responsibilities and how it commits itself to enhancing regional development through both bilateral and regional programming and resourcing. This should be reflected not only in dollar terms, but also in the posture and style of Australia's engagement.

### 2024 Lowy Institute Poll<sup>26</sup>

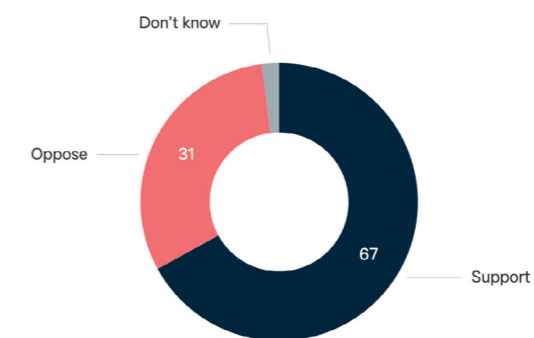
Please rate your feelings towards some countries and territories, with one hundred meaning a very warm, favourable feeling, zero meaning a very cold, unfavourable feeling, and fifty meaning not particularly warm or cold. You can use any number from zero to one hundred: the higher the number the more favourable your feelings are toward that country or territory. If you have no opinion or have never heard of that country or territory, please say so.



In 2006, this question asked respondents about their feelings towards 'countries and peoples'. From 2007 to 2018, this question asked respondents about their feelings towards 'countries'. Until 2015, this question asked respondents about 'Great Britain', and from 2015 to 2019, respondents were asked about 'United Kingdom (Great Britain)'. Until 2019, this question asked respondents about 'Myanmar/Burma'. Until 2023, this question asked respondents about 'East Timor'.

Legend: 2020 (light blue), 2022 (medium blue), 2024 (dark blue). TOTAL All groups

Would you support or oppose relaxing visa requirements for citizens of Pacific Islands countries to enable them to live, work and study in Australia?



Legend: Support (dark blue), Oppose (red), Don't know (grey). TOTAL All groups

25 Emma Shortis, Who cares about national security?, *The Australia Institute*, 22 November 2023: <https://australiainstitute.org.au/post/who-cares-about-security/>

26 Ryan Neelam, Lowy Institute Poll 2024, *Lowy Institute*, June 2024: <https://poll.lowyinstitute.org/>

## PACIFIC REGIONALISM

Australia's role

## Subregional Groupings

### Melanesian Spearhead Group

#### Partner

The Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) was established in 1986 with a primary purpose to strive for the decolonisation and freedom of the Melanesian countries and territories still under colonial rule in the South Pacific.

Comprised of Papua New Guinea, Fiji, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, and the Front de Libération de Nationale Kanak et Socialiste of New Caledonia, the MSG's vision is a Melanesian community that is strong, integrated, enlightened, happy, prosperous, secure and caring.

### Polynesian Leaders Group

#### No role

The Polynesian Leaders Group (PLG) was established in 2011 and includes Samoa, Tonga, French Polynesia, American Samoa, Cook Islands, Tokelau, Niue and Tuvalu. It has also hosted Māori delegations from New Zealand, as membership is not limited to nation-states, but open to any Polynesian society. Unlike the MSG, the PLG maintains a working relationship with the PIF and holds its meetings on the margins of PIF fora.

### Micronesian President's Summit

#### No role

The Micronesian President's Summit was established in 2001 and involves leaders of Palau, Kiribati, Nauru, Marshall Islands (RMI) and Federated States of Micronesia (FSM) meeting annually to discuss Micronesian solidarity and security cooperation. A similar Micronesian Chief Executives Summit was initiated in 2003 and includes the presidents of Palau, FSM and RMI, as well as governors from the US territories of the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI), Guam and the FSM states of Chuuk, Kosrae, Pohnpei and Yap.

### Parties to the Nauru Agreement

#### Partner

The Parties to the Nauru Agreement (PNA) control the world's largest sustainable tuna purse seine fishery. PNA Members are FSM, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Tuvalu plus Tokelau.

Global leaders in tuna conservation and management, many PNA conservation measures are world firsts – such as high seas closures to fishing, controls on Fish Aggregating Devices (FADs), protection for whale sharks and the 100% coverage of purse seine fishing vessels with observers.

## PACIFIC ISLANDS FORUM

#### Member

Founded in 1971, the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) is the region's premier policy organisation, with 18 members. Its vision is for a resilient region of peace, harmony, security, social inclusion and prosperity. PIF works to achieve this by fostering cooperation between governments, collaboration with regional and international agencies, development partners and stakeholders and by representing the interests of its Members.

## Multilateral Partnerships

### Forum Dialogue Partners

#### Australia is a member of PIF

Forum Dialogue Partners are countries that strategically engage with the Pacific Islands Forum, contributing to discussions and initiatives aimed at regional development and security. The five founding partners were Canada, France, Japan, United Kingdom and the United States. Fifteen other countries, plus the European Union, are also now partners.

### Pacific Islands Leaders Meeting

#### Member

Japan has hosted this summit-level meeting with all PIF members every three years since 1997.

### Partners for the Blue Pacific

#### Member

Formed in 2022, Partners in the Blue Pacific (PBP) is an informal group aimed at boosting economic and diplomatic ties with Pacific Island countries. Its member states are Australia, New Zealand, Japan, the United States and United Kingdom, with partner countries South Korea, Canada and Germany. Its objective is to bring greater resources and practical, tangible results to Pacific priorities.

## United Nations

### United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction

#### Involved through UN membership

The UNDRR Sub-Regional Office for the Pacific, based in Fiji, is part of the Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific and works with governments, United Nations Country Teams, regional and international organisations and stakeholder groups, to protect people from disasters, build resilience and support sustainable development.

## Non-Government

### Pacific Public Health Surveillance Network

#### Allied member

Established in 1996, the Pacific Public Health Surveillance Network (PPHSN) is a voluntary network of countries and organisations dedicated to the promotion of public health surveillance and appropriate response to the health challenges of 22 Pacific Island countries and territories.

The first priorities of the PPHSN are communicable diseases, especially the outbreak-prone ones. Currently, the target diseases include: dengue, measles, rubella, influenza, leptospirosis, typhoid fever, cholera and HIV/STIs.

### Pacific Conference of Churches

#### Australian member

Formed in 1961 by key Pacific church figures as the region was decolonising, church leaders from Dutch Papua in the West to Samoa in the East established this ecumenical organisation out of former mission churches. The PCC works closely with the Pacific Theological College which opened in 1966 and the South Pacific Association of Theological Schools, founded in 1969.

### Pacific Islands Association of Non-Governmental Organisations

#### Member and Liaison Unit

The Pacific Islands Association of Non-Governmental Organisations (PIANGO) builds the capacity of NGOs and the civil society sector through giving the sector a collective voice in policy formulation.

PIANGO's primary role is to be a catalyst for collective action, to facilitate and support coalitions and alliances on issues of common concern, and to strengthen the influence and impact of NGO efforts in the region. The first PIANGO Council was held in August 1991 in Pago Pago, American Samoa.

### Pacific Disability Forum

#### Funding partner

The Pacific Disability Forum is a constituency of 71 organisations of and for persons with disabilities and associate members across 22 Pacific Island countries and territories. Its mission is to ensure full inclusion and effective participation of persons with disabilities within their respective societies

### Pacific Islands Private Sector Organisation

#### Australian affiliate member

Established in 2005, the Pacific Islands Private Sector Organisation (PIPSO) has the mission to advocate for private sector-led economic growth and promote and inspire the flourishing of Pacific businesses.

## Public Sector

### Oceania Customs Organisation

#### Member

The Oceania Customs Organisation (OCO) was established in August 1998 to promote efficiency and effectiveness in all aspects of Regional Customs Administrations. The OCO has a membership of 23 countries and territories, and its principal activity is assisting members align with customs international standards and best practice.

### Pacific Islands Chiefs of Police

#### Member

Founded in Suva in 1970, the Pacific Islands Chiefs of Police (PICP) brings together Pacific Police Chiefs to exchange information, and form regional agreements. It works continuously to build safer and more secure communities by improving policing.

### Pacific Association of Supreme Audit Institutions

#### Member

The Pacific Association of Supreme Audit Institutions (PASAI) is the official association of supreme audit institutions (SAIs) in the Pacific region. PASAI promotes transparent, accountable, effective and efficient use of public sector resources in the Pacific. It contributes to that goal by helping its members SAIs improve the quality of public sector auditing in the Pacific to recognised high standards.

### Pacific Immigration Development Community

#### Member

The Pacific Immigration Development Community (PIDC) was established in 1996 as a forum for regional official immigration agencies of the Pacific Region. PIDC enables heads of immigration agencies to discuss issues of mutual interest and to foster multilateral co-operation and mutual assistance aimed at strengthening members' territorial borders and the integrity of their entry systems.

### Pacific Islands Law Officers' Network

#### Member

The Pacific Islands Law Officers' Network (PILON) is a network of senior law officers from 19 Pacific Island countries who work together to contribute to a safe and secure Pacific by advancing key law and justice issues.

The Network has held annual meetings since 1981, initially under the title of Pacific Islands Law Officers' Meeting (PILOM). In 2007, it established a permanent secretariat and formalised its organisational structure to identify and implement, and take action on, common law and justice issues common across the Pacific.

## Council of Regional Organisations of the Pacific

#### Indirect, via PIF membership

The Council of Regional Organisations of the Pacific (CROP) is a partnership of regional, intergovernmental agencies that support the commitment to regionalism and the principle objectives of sustainable development; inclusive and equitable economic growth; strengthened governance, legal, financial and administrative systems; and peace and security. It was established by PIF leaders in 1988 to improve cooperation, coordination and collaboration between Pacific intergovernmental organisations.

### The Pacific Community

#### Member

The Pacific Community (SPC) supports sustainable development by applying a people-centred approach to science, research and technology across the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Founded in 1947, its mission is to progress all Pacific peoples' rights and well-being through science and knowledge, centring Blue Pacific contexts and cultures. Covering more than 20 sectors, SPC focuses on knowledge and innovation in fisheries science, public health surveillance, geoscience and conservation of plant genetic resources for food security.

### Forum Fisheries Agency

#### Member and donor partner

Since 1979, the Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA) has facilitated regional cooperation on fisheries policies. Based in Honiara, the FFA advises its 17 members on how best to manage, control and develop their sustainable offshore fisheries.

### Pacific Tourism Organisation

#### No formal role

Established in 1983 the Pacific Tourism Organisation (SPTO) assists in the development of regional tourism policy through research and statistics and prioritises sustainable tourism within its international marketing of region.

### Pacific Power Association

#### Australian affiliates and allied members

Established in 1992, The Pacific Power Association (PPA) is an inter-governmental agency promoting to promote the direct cooperation of the Pacific Island power utilities in technical training, exchange of information, sharing of senior management and engineering expertise and other activities of benefit to the members.

Established in 1992, its objective is to improve the quality of power in the region through a cooperative effort among the utilities, private sector and regional aid donors. The PPA's members pool their resources and expertise for their common benefit, gain international representation and improve access to international power sector assistance programmes.

### Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme

#### Member

The Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP) was established in 1993 by regional governments as is the regional organisation established by the Governments and Administrations of the Pacific charged with protecting and managing the environment and natural resources of the Pacific.

Its mandate is to promote cooperation within the Pacific region and provide assistance in order to protect and improve its environment and to ensure sustainable development for present and future generations.

### Pacific Aviation Safety Office

#### Associate member

Established in 2004, the Pacific Aviation Safety Office (PASO) provides aviation safety and security service for Member States in the Pacific. It is the sole international organisation responsible for regional regulatory aviation safety oversight for the 10 Pacific States which are signatories to the Pacific Islands Civil Aviation Safety and Security Treaty (Cook Islands, Kiribati, Nauru, Niue, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu). Associate Members of PASO are Australia, Fiji and New Zealand. Government representatives from these nations make up the PASO Council.

### Pacific Islands Development Program

#### No formal role

The Pacific Islands Development Program (PIDP) was formed in 1980 with the founding mission to assist Pacific Islands' leaders to advance their collective efforts to achieve and sustain equitable social and economic development.

Housed in the East-West Center in Hawaii, it serves the states and peoples of the Pacific through innovative capacity building, exchange among regional leaders, and policy-relevant research on priority issues.

### University of the South Pacific

#### Core funding partner

The University of the South Pacific (USP) is a dual sector University serving the Pacific region and only one of three regional universities of its kind in the world. Uniquely governed by its twelve member countries, USP is not only a higher education and research institution, but also a regional integration organisation that provides services within communally agreed regional mechanisms geared towards benefiting the lives of the Pacific people.

### Pacific Security College

#### Funder

The Pacific Security College (PSC) is an independent educational institution funded by DFAT. Initially announced in the 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper, it was launched in November 2019.

Housed at the Australian National University to work in partnership with members of PIF, the PSC supports the implementation of the Boe Declaration through short courses, strategic advice, workshops and technical assistance. Consistent with the Boe Declaration and the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent, the PSC's work encompasses traditional and non-traditional security issues.

# Case Studies

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## REGIONAL ASSISTANCE MISSION TO SOLOMON ISLANDS

The Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI)<sup>27</sup> was a partnership between the people and Government of Solomon Islands and 15 contributing countries of the Pacific region. At the request of the Solomon Islands government in 2003, RAMSI was a response to the ethnic violence that had gripped the country. It achieved significant results, restoring law and order, reconstituting the economy, and rebuilding government infrastructure. RAMSI focused on eliminating militancy and weapons, stabilising the economy, and rebuilding the police force, courts, and correctional services. This mission exemplifies the fusion of Australian leadership and Pacific character, essential for addressing major challenges like climate change and geopolitical shifts. RAMSI highlighted the effectiveness of patient, collaborative intervention.

## FALEPILI UNION

The Falepili Union<sup>28</sup> is a bilateral treaty signed on 9 November 2023 between Australia and Tuvalu aimed at fostering a more advanced, integrated, and comprehensive partnership. The key features include special visa arrangements for Tuvaluan citizens to live, work, and study in Australia, commitments to mutual security and sovereignty, Australian support for Tuvalu's climate adaptation efforts with an additional \$16.9 million for the Tuvalu Coastal Adaptation Project (TCAP), and an uplifted broader bilateral partnership including development assistance. The union embodies the Tuvaluan concept of "Falepili", reflecting the duty of neighbours to care for, share with, and protect each other, underpinned by respect for sovereignty and independence. While this is a bilateral initiative, it is a potential model for other bilateral or cross-regional arrangements.

## PARTNERS IN THE BLUE PACIFIC INITIATIVE

In 2022, five countries – Australia, Japan, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States— launched the Partners in the Blue Pacific initiative with the aim of harnessing their collective strength through closer cooperation to support prosperity, resilience and security in the Pacific launched.<sup>29</sup> It was described as an inclusive, informal mechanism to support Pacific priorities more effectively and efficiently, to bolster Pacific regionalism and to expand cooperation between the Pacific and the world. Germany, Canada, and the Republic of Korea have since joined as partners while France and the EU are observers.<sup>30</sup>

## PACIFIC AUSTRALIA LABOUR MOBILITY

The Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM)<sup>31</sup> scheme connects Australian employers with workers from nine Pacific Island countries and Timor-Leste. The scheme aims to fill labour gaps in regional and rural Australia while providing opportunities to Pacific and Timorese workers to develop skills, earn income and send money home to support their families and communities, and contribute to the economic growth of their countries. The scheme is managed by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations with the support of the Pacific Labour Facility.

## PACIFIC ENGAGEMENT VISA

The Pacific Engagement Visa<sup>32</sup> is a new permanent resident visa for participating countries across the Pacific and Timor-Leste intended to deepen connections between Australia and the region. Up to 3,000 visas, inclusive of partners and dependent children, will be made available annually to Pacific and Timor-Leste nationals through a ballot process. The programme was designed in consultation with partner governments and communities to ensure it delivers on shared needs and objectives and commenced in June 2024. Countries currently participating include the Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Nauru, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Timor-Leste, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu.

## PACIFIC WOMEN LEAD

Pacific Women Lead (PWL)<sup>33</sup> is Australia's flagship regional gender equality investment for the Pacific. It aims to promote women's leadership, realise women's rights, and increase the effectiveness of regional gender equality efforts. PWL aims to ensure that Pacific women and girls, in all their diversity, are safe and equitably share in resources, opportunities and decision-making, with men and boys. The programme's focus is on women's leadership, women's rights and increasing the effectiveness of regional gender equality efforts. The programme's funding is additional and complementary to Australia's bilateral gender investments. Key partners are the Pacific Community and Pacific women's organisations.

## DEFENCE PATROL BOATS

The Pacific Maritime Security Program (PMSP)<sup>34</sup> aims to enhance maritime security through a comprehensive package of capabilities, infrastructure, sustainment, training, and coordination for 15 Pacific Island countries and Timor-Leste. The PMSP includes new Guardian-class patrol boats, lifetime sustainment and training, in-country advisers, region-wide integrated aerial surveillance, and enhancements to regional coordination. Building on the success of the original Pacific Patrol Boat Program, the PMSP ensures an uninterrupted 60-year engagement in the Pacific. Australia is delivering 22 Guardian-class patrol boats to 12 Pacific nations and Timor-Leste, with 18 already delivered to 11 partner nations.

## IUU FISHING

The Australian Fisheries Management Authority combats illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing through its International Compliance and Engagement Program 2022-24.<sup>35</sup> IUU fishing threatens the sustainability and economic viability of fisheries by violating rules (illegal), failing to report catches (unreported), and operating without agreed regulations (unregulated). Australia works with Pacific Island partners to tackle IUU fishing through regional cooperation, ensuring sustainable management of fish stocks and maritime security. This collaboration ensures compliance with measures adopted by Pacific Island nations and International Fisheries Management Organizations.

27 <https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/solomon-islands/solomon-islands-country-brief>

28 <https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/tuvalu/australia-tuvalu-falepili-union>

29 Joint Statement on the Announcement of the Partners in the Blue Pacific Initiative | Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade ([dfat.gov.au](https://www.dfat.gov.au))

30 Readout of The Partners in the Blue Pacific (PBP) Ministerial - United States Department of State; Enhance Coordination with France in the Indo-Pacific - AsiaPacific4D

31 <https://www.palmscheme.gov.au/>

32 <https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/pacific/people-connections/people-connections-in-the-pacific/pacific-engagement-visa>

33 <https://pacificwomen.org/>

34 <https://www.defence.gov.au/defence-activities/programs-initiatives/pacific-engagement/maritime-capability>

35 <https://www.afma.gov.au/fisheries-management/international-fisheries-management/iuu-fishing>

## DISASTER RELIEF

The Australian Humanitarian Partnership (AHP)<sup>36</sup> is a partnership between the Australian Government and Australian non-government organisations. It represents a significant investment by the Australian Government in disaster preparedness in the region, with AHP partners delivering locally-led programmes through their networks in Fiji, Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea, and Timor-Leste. The AHP delivers a ten-year, 100 million Disaster READY initiative across the Pacific and Timor-Leste to support Pacific communities and governments in better preparing for and responding to disasters.<sup>37</sup> In line with the Climate Change Action Strategy 2020-25, the AHP will support local organisations and communities to identify and adapt to climate risks and hazards and increase their capacity to respond and bounce back after disasters.

## PACIFIC NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGIES

Four Pacific Island countries (Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Vanuatu and Solomon Islands) have completed national security strategies with funding and technical assistance from Australia.<sup>38</sup> National security strategies differ across countries, but many threats are common to all, while each strategy has a context specific analysis of the security environment, current local capabilities, and gaps and actions needed. The strategies give governments and partners tools to prioritise and deliver actions and work more cohesively, with a whole-of-government approach, to allocate resources. Supporting Pacific people to develop national security strategies is an example of how Australia can support sovereign decisions of Pacific Island countries to identify security threats and concerns and enable appropriate responses.

## AUSTRALIA AWARDS

The Australia Awards facilitate study, research, and professional development for emerging global leaders, funded by the Australian Government.<sup>39</sup> Originating from the Colombo Plan in the 1950s, they bolster growth, stability, and cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region. By equipping recipients with skills and knowledge, they empower them to drive change and contribute to their countries' economic and social development. Australia Awards Pacific Scholarships enhance Pacific Islanders' capacity to influence their home countries' development. Ultimately, they serve as a vital link in building human resource capacity and fostering collaboration within the Pacific region.

## PACIFIC DISABILITY FORUM

The Pacific Disability Forum<sup>40</sup> is a regional non-governmental initiative inaugurated in July 2004. The Forum's vision is an inclusive and equitable Pacific society where the rights of all persons with disabilities are realised, as outlined in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Its main goals are to promote and advocate for the recognition of all human rights of persons with disabilities and to support the development and strengthening of disabled persons' organisations. Funded by CBM Australia and Australia Aid, PDF fosters regional cooperation on disability-related concerns.

## AUSTRALIAN HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION

The Australian Human Rights Commission's (AHRC)<sup>41</sup> recent Pacific activities have included: quarterly Pacific Human Rights Coordination Meetings that bring together human rights actors in the region; collaboration with National Human Rights Institutions (NHRI), such as the 2023 Pacific Regional Forum on NHRI; supporting an NHRI side event at the 2023 Pacific Islands Forum; and inviting Pacific NHRIs to Australian human rights initiatives, such as hosting Pacific representatives from the Fiji Human Rights and Anti-Discrimination Commission, the New Zealand Human Rights Commission, and the Cook Islands Office of the Ombudsman.

## PACIFICAUS SPORTS

PacificAus Sports<sup>42</sup> creates new opportunities for athletes, coaches, and administrators in the Pacific region to train, play, and grow together through collaborative partnerships. The programme aims to enhance the performance of Pacific athletes across netball, rugby league, rugby union and football by providing access to Australian competitions, high-performance coaching and international training. Additionally, it supports the development of sports professionals through best-practice education and training. By encouraging these connections, PacificAus Sports aims to strengthen the long-standing relationship between Australia and the Pacific, uniting communities through shared sporting experiences and memories.

36 <https://australianhumanitarianpartnership.org/>

37 <https://australianhumanitarianpartnership.org/preparedness>

38 Henry Ivarature, National Security Strategies in the Pacific — Some Challenges, ANU Department of Pacific Affairs, 1 February 2023: <https://dspace-prod.anu.edu.au/server/api/core/bitstreams/8eb994ee-d59a-4845-bcb2-409358d138c3/content>

39 <https://www.australiaawards.com.au/about/>

40 <https://pacificdisability.org/>

41 AHRC Submission to Attorney-General's Department regarding Pacific Engagement Strategy consultation, 14 December 2023

42 <https://www.pacificausports.gov.au/about/pacificaus-sports>

# Opportunities and Barriers

## OPPORTUNITIES

Pacific regionalism rests on the identification of commonalities – key priorities shared across the region – that can serve as a foundation to build a sense of solidarity.

There are opportunities for Australia to build on a range of common interests. For example, the security and sustainability of fisheries is of mutual concern to all Pacific countries, including Australia,<sup>43</sup> as is a regional capacity for effective disaster response.

Due to geographic impediments, Pacific states which consist of multiple and remote islands and atolls can struggle with service delivery, particularly in the area of health, but also with maritime domain awareness in their often-vast Exclusive Economic Zones. Emerging issues such as transnational crime, up-to-date scientific capabilities and data collection are likewise areas that small island states can struggle to deal with on their own.

There is much work being done by Pacific Islands Forum around people-centred development, and this needs to include more substantive work on disability access and inclusion. There are pan-regional partnerships that can be consolidated through the Pacific Disability Forum to improve understanding of the requirements that can translate into policy and action.<sup>44</sup>

In pursuing these opportunities, Australia's objective should be weighted more towards capacity-building, rather than Australia simply supplementing perceived deficits. Investments in skills and technology allows Pacific Islanders to command these areas themselves and helps to bring greater reciprocity to regional structures.<sup>45</sup> It is through these enhanced capabilities

that the growth and prosperity of the region can be ensured while nurturing stronger, collaborative relationships.

These commonalities also are identified with the flourishing of informal linkages. Diaspora, sporting, religious, academic and issue-based groups that are organised outside of political structures play a central role in forging a strong sense of regional affinity.

Australia's multiculturalism means that there are strong Pacific diaspora groups within the country. These are people with intimate knowledge of their home countries, who maintain strong familial, cultural and economic links. They are a critical asset that Australia can draw upon to build stronger networks between itself and the region.

The proposed addition of a Papua New Guinea team to Australia's National Rugby League competition for example, would be a significant boost to enhancing regional sporting ties, as has been the case with the addition of two Pacific teams to the Super Rugby (Union) competition, now renamed Super Rugby Pacific – bringing a greater sense of regionalism to both rugby code competitions.<sup>46</sup>

There is also much work being done by the Australian government in support of Pacific athletes, officials and communities through sport for development programmes which address social change and inclusion issues such as gender empowerment, health, youth development, and disability inclusion.<sup>47</sup> Such programmes can underline some of the commonalities that connect the region.

Another proposal, responding to the Defence Strategic Review's call for "innovative and bold approach[es]" to recruitment, outlines potential pathways for the enlistment

of Pacific Islanders into the Australian Defence Force (ADF). The report's authors argue this would also put Pacific Island governments in a unique position to inform Australia's security assessments and contribute to shared outcomes, and build stronger two-way cultural and social engagement, bolstering familiarity and understanding between the ADF and Pacific Island countries.<sup>48</sup>

These emerging opportunities are often harnessed bilaterally but can also have regional implications.

**"In a fast-evolving world, how we act as a collective, as well as how and who we engage with, must protect our own unique interests. The 2050 Strategy will set the tone and articulate the quality and type of Pacific regionalism that will emerge from our current challenges in the region, and will place the region in good stead to meet our future challenges, and to leverage and act on the opportunities that emerge."**

*51st Pacific Islands Forum Communique*

**"The true benefits of regionalism must be measured by its impact on the ground to our Pacific people, and most importantly, the most vulnerable of our Forum Family."**

*Pacific Islands Forum Secretary General Henry Puna at the Smaller Islands States Leaders Meeting, 8 November 2023*

<sup>48</sup> Bec Shrimpton and Zach Lambert, Regional security and Pacific partnerships: recruiting Pacific Islanders into the Australian Defence Force, *Australian Strategic Policy Institute*, April 2024: <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/regional-security-and-pacific-partnerships-recruiting-pacific-islanders-australian-defence>

**"We have a story to tell from the Pacific about how we can do better so that not just the loudest voices are heard but that we have a shared voice that equally reflects everyone."**

*Setareki Maeanaawsai, CEO Pacific Disability Forum, 2017*

**"Entrenched and increasing strategic competition between the United States and China is a primary feature of our security environment. It is being accompanied by an unprecedented conventional and non-conventional military build-up in our region, taking place without strategic reassurance or transparency. The challenges to regional stability and prosperity arising from this competition are being compounded by a range of other security risks, including climate change, grey-zone activities and technological advancements."**

*2024 National Defence Strategy*

**"To be a partner of choice for our region, we must deliver a world class development program that advances our shared regional interests."**

*2023-24 Development Budget Summary*

<sup>43</sup> Asia-Pacific Development, Diplomacy & Defence Dialogue, *What does it look like for Australia to be an Effective Partner in Combatting Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated Fishing*, April 2023: <https://asiapacific4d.com/idea/combating-iuufishing/>

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<sup>47</sup> PacificAus Sports Program, <https://www.pacificaussports.gov.au/about/pacificaus-sports>; Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Sports Diplomacy 2030, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/people-to-people/sports-diplomacy>

## BARRIERS

### Australia's Interests Outside the Pacific

For Australia, there are a set of critical interests that lie outside of the Pacific Islands region. Australia is also an Indian Ocean state, with an attendant strong westward pull.<sup>49</sup> Alongside this, Australia's economic interests are heavily weighted in Northeast Asia, its primary security partner remains the United States, and it continues to maintain deep cultural and historical links with Europe.

These economic, security and cultural connections do not preclude Australia's commitment to Pacific regionalism, but they do pull Australia in directions that are less conducive to further integration.

One example raised in consultations is Australia announcing AUKUS without regional consultation – a major new security initiative with external partners, and one that involves nuclear material, which is a particularly sensitive topic within Pacific Island countries.<sup>50</sup> Australia's support<sup>51</sup> for Japan's release of nuclear wastewater from the damaged Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power station into the Pacific Ocean is another example of where Australia's position differentiates it from the rest of the region.<sup>52</sup>

### Differing Agendas

Australia can also have different understandings of what is important in the regional agenda. Consultations identified climate change as an area where Australia is struggling in its practice of Pacific regionalism.

There is a shared set of regional values as articulated in the Framework for Pacific Regionalism, the Boe Declaration and the 2050 Blue Pacific Strategy, however Australia's interests often conflict with the values to which it has committed in these agreements.

Over several years Australia has endorsed many regional declarations and initiatives around climate change, while at the same time seeking to preserve, or even enhance, its own economic interests through the use and export of fossil fuels. Without a commitment to reconcile the values it puts its weight behind through regional instruments and its own actions, Australia undermines the trust it has gained from the Pacific region and inhibits the ability for regional initiatives to have their desired impact.<sup>53</sup> This, in turn, weakens the concept and practice of Pacific regionalism.

For Pacific Island countries, there are also priorities that may not align with Australia's. The idea of a regional human rights body has long been debated throughout the region but can be contentious subject matter that requires serious consideration about powers and reach. This can be compounded by the fact that many Pacific Island states lack national human rights bodies.

**“[T]oday, we face an unprecedented threat to our very existence... We must establish a collective understanding of the challenges posed by sea-level rise and prioritize policy and legal options to address them in the short, medium, and long term.”**

*Tuvalu Foreign Affairs Minister Simon Kofoe, 27 March 2023*

**“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.”**

*Prime Minister of Tuvalu Enele Sopoaga, December 2018<sup>54</sup>*

### Imbalance

Critical to the success of Pacific regionalism is how Australia can manage its behaviour in regional contexts, particularly within Pacific Islands Forum. Australia is much larger and more affluent than most other forum members, and this has led at times to the perception that the Australian government throws its weight around and overly influences the regional agenda.<sup>55</sup> Some consultees mentioned the 2006 Pacific Plan regional reform agenda as an example of this.

Australia's relative size and administrative capacity can also be a hindrance to its involvement in Pacific regionalism. The size of its delegations and ability to advance its own perspectives within regional forums can often create lopsided discussion or policy proposals.

Most Pacific Island nations have much smaller delegations than Australia, which impacts their ability to fully prepare and engage across the full range of regional governance processes. For example, in consultations it was mentioned that Niue has only three people in its Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which makes engaging within the current architecture a challenge, and makes aligning itself to new initiatives or additional mechanisms difficult.

49 Asia-Pacific Development, Diplomacy & Defence Dialogue, *What does it look like for Australia to Strengthen its Indian Ocean Engagement*, April 2024: <https://asiapacific4d.com/idea/indian-ocean-engagement/>

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### Ad Hoc Arrangements

Given the resources that it has, Australia has at times been tempted to establish separate arrangements which may have a regional focus – and be committed to regional priorities – but which sit outside of formal structures.

One example of this would be the Pacific Fusion Centre, which was established before its place in the regional governance system was sought. Another is the Pacific Security College, which consultees perceived as primarily an Australian initiative rather than something actively sought by Pacific Island countries.

In 2022 the Partners for the Blue Pacific Initiative was established by Australia, Japan, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States as an inclusive, informal mechanism to support Pacific Island priorities.<sup>56</sup> Despite assurances it “will be led and guided by the Pacific Islands”, its creation outside of PIF structures, and the geopolitical context in which it was established has spawned criticism that it co-opts the Blue Pacific narrative while undermining the principles of Pacific regionalism.<sup>57</sup>

### Connectivity and Movement

In contrast to a region like the European Union, the Blue Pacific Continent’s lack of geographic contiguity poses challenges to the daily practicalities of Pacific regional integration. Travel between Pacific Island countries is expensive, complex and infrequent. This inhibits the bonds of commerce, culture and community which naturally emerge from ease of access between geographically closer countries. Connectivity challenges also limit Australia’s exposure to Pacific languages, culture and history, impeding its Pacific literacy.

Although the digital world has made contact easier, much of the Pacific Islands region outside of Australia and New Zealand lacks reliable digital services and broadband connectivity.<sup>58</sup> As commerce, education and essential services have increasingly moved online, this digital divide across the Pacific limits not only development outcomes, but the ability for the region to pursue greater integration.<sup>59</sup>

While opportunities exist for Pacific Islanders to access employment within Australia, this remains limited to certain industries and often comes with strict visa conditions.<sup>60</sup> These conditions are seen by some as undermining the idea of the “Pacific Family”.<sup>61</sup> At the same time, others express concern that increased mobility can have the effect of taking much needed labour out of Pacific Island countries and affecting the viability of villages, key industries and governance.<sup>62</sup>

“Both Australia and New Zealand, being former colonial powers in the region, have occasionally had image problems in the South Pacific, and both have at times been perceived as overbearing, condescending, or even hegemonic.”

*Eric Shibuya, The Problems and Potential of the Pacific Islands Forum, 2004*

“Perhaps there are many in Washington DC, Canberra, Wellington and other metropolitan countries jostling to save Pacific regionalism. It would be best for them to support, but not interfere or attempt to take advantage of the situation. There are ongoing conversations amongst Pacific Islanders aimed at creating better understandings going forward.”

*Tarcisius Kabutaulaka, Pacific Way(s) and Regionalism, 25 March 2021*

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# The Vision in Practice

## What does it look like for Australia to support Pacific regionalism?

Leaders across the region remain committed to Pacific regionalism to address shared challenges, leverage opportunities and attain national benefit. The region recognises that it faces numerous challenges and risks – including in relation to increasing and worsening climate change and disaster impacts.

Pacific regionalism is Pacific-led. Australia perceives itself as part of the Pacific Islands region and understands the ways in which it is accepted within the region, not just as a partner or a supporter of Pacific regionalism but as a collaborative voice at the Pacific regionalism table.

This Pacific identity is reciprocated by Pacific Islands leaders who see Australia as an integral part of the Pacific community. Despite its distinct culture and the pull of its other interests, Australia's presence within Pacific regionalism is a reality, and one that is embraced by other states in the region.

The ideal is collaboration that involves working together as family, rather than as neighbours, in line with the Polynesian concept of *talanoa* (storytelling) that leads to consensus-building and decision-making.

Australia has a clear understanding of what it has to offer and what it stands to gain from its contribution to Pacific regionalism and works to optimise both. To be responsive to current trends, Australia continues to review its involvement in the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) and regional institutions.

Australia invests in long-term relationships with Pacific institutions. This should encompass inclusive governance at all levels – including advancing women's voices at PIF, national and local levels.

The ideal is that, at a minimum, Pacific regionalism continues in its current structural state, with members pursuing incremental change unless or until there is appetite for deeper or more fundamental reform. A retreat from Pacific regionalism is not in Australia's interests.

More ambitiously, Australia could play a role in building commitment to enhanced regional structures, limiting the instances where countries seek to promote their own priorities rather than the regional policies that countries have agreed to.

Central to getting this balance right is recognising that while Australia's money and capacity has value, Pacific Island countries contribute knowledge, networks and experience that are critical to understanding and working effectively within the Pacific Islands region. In line with this vision, Australia recognises that relationships with Pacific Island nations are not one-way, and is open to mutual learning as central to regional cooperation.

Australia works to reconcile its economic interests and broader Indo-Pacific strategy with its engagement with Pacific regional fora. Australia is aware that opportunities exist for Pacific Island countries in their various engagements with countries with an interest in the Pacific, including China. It supports regional organisations' role in managing geopolitical competition and risk.

Australia maintains awareness of how it balances its relationships with its fellow PIF members and its other allies and partners.

Australia is wary about creating parallel agencies or bodies that do not specifically respond to Pacific Island priorities. Australia is cognisant of the capacities of other members of PIF and maintains a commitment to existing architecture. Wherever possible Australia works within existing mechanisms and instruments to further its policy aims and ambitions.

Commercial, social and cultural relationships develop a life of their own and don't necessarily need policy to make them happen. For Australia, this also means that Pacific Islands are in the line of sight of the broader Australian public, not solely those in government or those whose professional interests are in the region.

There is a greater awareness of Blue Pacific perspectives within Canberra. Australian policymakers see the Blue Pacific Strategy not just through a foreign policy lens but incorporate it within domestic policy across departments other than the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and Department of Defence.

**“Our Pacific Vision is for a region of peace, harmony, security, social inclusion, and prosperity, so that all Pacific people can lead free, healthy, and productive lives.”**

*Pacific Island Forum's Framework for Pacific Regionalism*



# Pathways

## SUPPORTING THE PACIFIC ISLANDS FORUM AND STRATEGY FOR THE BLUE PACIFIC CONTINENT

Australia should continue to provide support to the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) to implement the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent. Along with the 2018 Boe Declaration on Regional Security, the Strategy outlines ambitious plans for Pacific regionalism that pose a range of capacity, funding and logistical challenges.

Australia can play a role in meeting some of these challenges, mindful that it needs to act as a member, not a driver of PIF. The Forum has quite well-developed capacity on issues such as trade, but less on security. Australia needs to consider what role it can play in supporting this operationalisation without being seen to be pushing its own agenda, particularly given sensitivities about Australia's at times perceived securitisation of the region.

## EXPLORING A MORE INSTITUTIONALISED PROCESS FOR FACILITATING GEOPOLITICAL CONVERSATIONS

Australia should support the PIF to consider creating a more institutionalised process for facilitating geopolitical conversations, potentially along the lines of the ASEAN Regional Forum.

This would require consultation within PIF on the adequacy of institutional architecture and a reform agenda suited to PIF member state capabilities. For example, this could be an evolution of or addition to the current PIF Dialogue Partners roundtable process.<sup>63</sup>

## STRENGTHENING THE COORDINATION OF DEVELOPMENT SUPPORT AND PROGRESSING MORE FORMALISED DEVELOPMENT STRUCTURES WITHIN THE PACIFIC ISLANDS FORUM

Either in conjunction with this or separately, Australia should support strengthening the coordination of development support and progressing more formalised development structures within PIF. A more coordinated and targeted approach with other development partners, including China, would make for more effective development outcomes. This could be achieved by reviving the Cairns Compact (2009) or a similar mechanism.

Collectively, Pacific Island countries are behind in their projected 2030 targets for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).<sup>64</sup> Criteria like climate action, responsible consumption/production and water/sanitation, the region has regressed.<sup>65</sup> As the largest development partner in the region Australia's financial support and capacity will be central, but it must ensure that it provides this support as an equal member of PIF responding to Pacific Islands-led objectives.

## CONTINUING TO BUILD REGIONAL DISASTER RESPONSE CAPABILITY

Australia can demonstrate its commitment to collective regional action through continuing to build regional disaster response capability. This would assist in moving towards a vision of a region where countries collectively contribute to each other's security arrangements.

## USING A SUCCESSFUL JOINT AUSTRALIA-PACIFIC BID FOR COP31 TO ADVANCE THE STRATEGY FOR THE BLUE PACIFIC CONTINENT

Significant opportunities will open up if the bid to host a joint Australia-Pacific COP31 in 2026 is successful.

As well as showcasing Pacific Islands' climate diplomacy, it would also signal Australia's intent to be an integral part of this diplomacy and to demonstrate that it is promoting the ideals of the Blue Pacific Strategy globally, not solely within its regional foreign policy.

It will also encourage policymakers to incorporate the Blue Pacific Strategy within domestic policy and for Australia to view climate change – an issue that the region deems existential – with the same urgency as the Pacific.

63 Greg Fry, Tarcisius Kabutaulaka and Terence Wesley-Smith, 'Partners in the Blue Pacific' initiative rides roughshod over established regional processes, *Devpolicy*, 5 July 2022: <https://devpolicy.org/pbp-initiative-rides-roughshod-over-regional-processes-20220705/>

64 United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *Sustainable Development Goals*, <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>

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