

Relational Security: Ethical Dilemmas of Geopolitics in the Blue Pacific Continent

Maima Koro

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Maima Koro is a Pacific Research Fellow for the Regional Perspectives Project, a research collaboration between the University of Adelaide with Pacific partners, funded by the Defence, Science and Technology Group. She is also pursuing PhD studies, focusing on the intersection of security and justice in Pacific communities. She has a particular interest in whole of country processes, grounded theories and applied research approaches. Her research interests include, international relations, global security, geopolitics, development studies, ethics and capacity development. Maima has over 20 years of international development experience in the Pacific at national and regional levels. She has worked in the law enforcement, education, health, and governance sectors. She has managed extensive stakeholder networks across Pacific governments, regional and multilateral organisations. Her management experience includes the integration of large multi-disciplinary teams and development of multi-year plans for complex multi-stakeholder projects across a host of island countries in the Pacific. An expert on the Pacific landscape, she specialises in the contextualisation of donor-funded initiatives, of relevance to Pacific environments.

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Please direct inquiries to:

Asia-Pacific Leadership Network
APLN Secretariat
4th floor, 116, Pirundae-ro
Jongno-gu, Seoul, ROK, 03035
Tel. +82-2-2135-2170
Fax. +82-70-4015-0708
Email. apln@apln.network

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Cover Photo: An 8-ship joint-coalition formation flies over Guam during US Air Force-sponsored exercise Cope North 21
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Maima Koro

Pacific Research Fellow, The University of Adelaide

“He koni mata ko lava e kikila”¹

Abstract

Existing political commentary on the geopolitics in the Pacific are fixated on geopolitical contest amongst metropolitan powers. Yet, little attention is paid to the emerging ethical dilemmas arising from this geopolitical competition. Increasingly, Pacific people are concerned about both the historical and ongoing distress of this unstable contest. Pacific people understand this to be an ethical dilemma as the consequences of strategic competition in the region can have negative repercussions out of their control. In this paper, I explore some of the ethical dilemmas of the Pacific people. To resolve this dilemma, the paper introduces a relational approach to security as a means of reimagining the rules-based order.

Introduction

This is a discussion of the ethical implications of the competing geostrategic interest in the Blue Pacific Continent (the Blue Pacific). Existing political, media, and scholarly attention of geopolitics in the Blue Pacific are largely informed by geopolitical contest amongst metropolitan powers.² The geopolitical contest is

¹ “Humble observer” in Tokelauan.

² See also, Rebecca Strating, Douglas Guilfoyle, Steven Ratuva, and Joanne Wallis, “Commentary: China in the Maritime Pacific,” *Marine Policy* 141 (2022): 105092, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2022.105092>; Joanne Wallis, “Contradictions in Australia,” *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 75, no. 5 (2021): 487-506, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2021.1951657>; Brendan Nicholson, “Australia Must Avoid War in the Region, Says Penny Wong,” *The Strategist*, April 17, 2023, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/australia-must-avoid-war-in-the-region-says-penny-wong/>; Lydia Lewis, “Biden’s Stop-over in PNG Derided as ‘Muscle Flexing,’” *RNZ*, May 11, 2023, <https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/489683/biden-s-stop-over-in-png-derided-as-muscle-flexing>; Marian Faa, “Micronesian President Suggests Severing Diplomatic Ties With China ..,” *ABC News*, March 10, 2023, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-03-10/panuelo-federated-states-of-micronesia-china-taiwan/102078898>; Maima Koro, Henrietta McNeill, Henry Ivarature, and Joanne Wallis, “Tā, Vā, and Lā: Re-Imagining the Geopolitics of the Pacific Islands,” *Political Geography* 105 (2023): 102931, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2023.102931>; Adam Grydehoj, Michael Lujan Bevacqua, Megumi Chibana, Yaso Nadarajah, Aká Simonsen, Ping Su, Renee Wright, and Sasha Davis, “Practicing Decolonial Political Geography: Island Perspectives on Neocolonialism and the China Threat Discourse,” *Political Geography* 85 (2021): 102330, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2020.102330>

represented as a competition mainly between the US (and its allies) and China.³ Pacific Leaders are increasingly concerned that the Pacific people will suffer the consequences of this unstable contest all over again. Pacific people understand this to be an ethical dilemma as Pacific countries have and are still experiencing the impact and implications of big power conflicts. In this paper, I will explore the ethical dilemma related to the concept of “geopolitics” as depicted by the major powers.

The Oxford dictionary defines “ethics” as, moral principles that govern a person’s behaviour or the conducting of an activity. It can also mean the branch of knowledge that deals with moral principles.⁴ Questions of morals and principles, good or correct, are contentious and can either harness collaboration and/or create dissension. This is true in all societies, including the Pacific. As a highly diverse and culturally rich region, at different levels of democratic maturity and development, the securitisation of the region has added complex ethical dilemmas because security means different things to different communities. At the outset, this paper is not an in-depth analysis of the ethical dilemmas that the Pacific people are experiencing in the face of intense global competition in the region. In the limited scope of this paper, this is a conversation starter to the “science of relationality”⁵ and not a comprehensive deep dive of the ethical concerns that the Pacific people are facing.

Inspired by Ken Booth’s call for academic commitment for critical approaches to security to be much more issue-driven rather than driven by an interest in questions of theory, this paper focuses on the ethical tensions with the concept of “geography and state” from my perspective.⁶ In this paper, “the Pacific” refers to the Blue Pacific Continent identity as endorsed by Pacific Leaders in 2017.⁷

My perspective is influenced by my identity and positionality as belonging to the large blue ocean with Tokelau and Samoa heritage, with extensive regional experiences, including working experiences in Australia and New Zealand. Most of the examples I use in this paper reflect my heritage and my experiences, even though my views may not be representative of my community or the wider region.

3 Jeffrey Cimmino and Matthew Kroenig, “Strengthen Likeminded Allies and Partners and the Rules-Based International System,” *Atlantic Council*, December 16, 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/atlantic-council-strategy-paper-series/strengthen-likeminded-allies-and-partners-and-the-rules-based-international-system/>.

4 “Ethic,” The Oxford Learners Dictionaries, accessed July 11, 2023, <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/american-english/ethic>.

5 Robbie Shilliam, “Conclusion,” *In The Black Pacific: Anti-Colonial Struggles and Oceanic Connections*, (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 183.

6 Ken Booth, *Theory of World Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

7 “Forty-Eighth Pacific Islands Forum, Apia, Samoa, Forum Communique, September, 5 – 8, 2017,” Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, accessed July 13, 2023, https://www.forumsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Final_48-PIF-Communique_2017_14Sep17.pdf.

Using Booth’s philosophical questions of “What is real? What can we know? How might we act?”⁸ as an analytical framework, I will first set the scene by reaffirming the Blue Pacific Continent as Pacific people’s understanding of geography.⁹ Secondly, I will discuss some of the ethical dilemmas that the Pacific people are experiencing in the face of the existing geostrategic competition, arguing that it is creating intergenerational distress. I will conclude with some recommendations that may contribute to addressing the ethical dilemmas faced by the Pacific people relating to the geostrategic contestation in the region.

By identifying the ethical issues, this paper seeks to advance the discussion on geopolitics in the Pacific and offer insights into the concept of relational security, which is a Pacific theory of security, in development.



Koror, Republic of Palau, Micronesia (Credit: Norimoto, iStock)

8 Booth, *Theory of World Security*.

9 “Forty-Eighth Pacific Islands Forum,” Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat.

What is real?

The Blue Pacific Continent

At the outset, let me address Booth's question of "what is real"?¹⁰ It is a fact that the Pacific spans a unique, diverse, and dynamic region, from north to south, of the Pacific Ocean. The Pacific occupies a vast oceanic region that covers almost 30% of the Earth's surface. According to the World Bank, Pacific Island member countries have a combined population of about 2.3 million people across a unique and diverse region. The region is home to hundreds of islands scattered over an area equivalent to 15% of the earth's surface. Pacific countries are home to substantial resources, contain extraordinary linguistic and cultural diversity, though physically remote. The region "confronts many of the worst impacts of climate change, [sic] and are some of the world's most vulnerable countries to climate disasters."¹¹

We also know that through colonial control, boundaries were drawn and redrawn to "exert geopolitical, geostrategic and geo-economic interests, and create and maintain global order and worldviews."¹² Within the Blue Pacific Continent, colonial presence still exists in French Polynesia, Wallis & Futuna, and New Caledonia as French territories. The Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, Guam, Hawaii, and American Samoa, are territories under the US authority. The Federated States of Micronesia, Palau, and the Republic of the Marshall Islands have Compact arrangements with the US. New Zealand has Realm arrangements with the Cook Islands, Niue, and Tokelau.

Inspired by Epeli Hau'ofa's vision of the Pacific as large ocean continents in his *Our Sea of Islands*, Pacific Leaders in 2017 endorsed the Blue Pacific Continent as a unifying identity for the Pacific.¹³ Hau'ofa's corrective vision of understanding geospatial in the Pacific has been mentioned by Susanne Kuehling in her review of the book, *The People of the Sea* by Paul D'Arcy. She writes, "The Pacific Ocean is, according to Epeli Hau'ofa, a 'Sea of Islands,' a large world of sea lanes connecting islands. This powerful image, drawn to counter the dominant

10 Booth, *Theory of World Security*.

11 "The World Bank in Pacific Islands," The World Bank, last modified September 23, 2022, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/pacificislands/overview>.

12 Tarcisius Kabutaulaka, "Mapping the Blue Pacific in a Changing Regional Order," In *The China Alternative: Changing Regional Order in the Pacific Islands*, ed. Graeme Smith and Terence Wesley-Smith (Acton, ANU Press, 2021): 42; see also: Epeli Hau'ofa, "Our Sea of Islands," *The Contemporary Pacific* 6, no. 1 (1994): 148-61, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23701593>; Epeli Hau'ofa, *We Are the Ocean: Selected Works* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008).; Teresia Teaiwa, "We sweat and cry salt water, so we know that the ocean is really in our blood," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 19, no. 2 (2017): 133-136, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2017.1323707>; Albert Wendt, "Towards a New Oceania," *Mana Review* 1, no. 1 (1976): 53.

13 "Forty-Eighth Pacific Islands Forum," Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat.

Western view of Pacific Islands as isolated, nonviable economies has so far gone unchallenged.”¹⁴

Pacific scholars have written extensively about the Pacific people’s connection with the land and the ocean. To Vaai and Nabobo-Baba, “Pacific Islanders grew up in a life that is more than the assumed individualised self, a life formed into an infinite multiplicity of becoming.”¹⁵ Vaai reaffirmed this Pacific worldview in his poem, “We don’t have land, we are the land. We don’t have ocean, we are the ocean. We don’t have relationship, we are relationship. Rooted, connected. Fixed yet fluid.”¹⁶ Relationality is in the DNA of the Pacific people. Kurki explains, “relational theories challenge, in a multitude of ways, how we understand and work with relations in International Relations (IR) scholarship. It invites engagement with thought and practice of relationality from different parts of the world and invites a rethinking of the boundaries between states and individuals but also between humans and non-humans.”¹⁷

In paraphrasing Hau’ofa, Oceania is us. We are the sea. We are the ocean. We should not be defined by the smallness of our islands, but the greatness of our oceans.¹⁸ In 2022, Pacific Leaders endorsed the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent as the mechanism for addressing the regional priorities of Pacific people.¹⁹

However, metropolitan powers pursue their geostrategic interest in the Pacific through understandings that ignore the relationality of the region, and instead, view the Pacific as countries with less sovereignty because their “spaces are qualitatively different from continental landscapes.”²⁰ Tarcisius Kabutaulaka argues, “the Blue Pacific empowers Pacific Island countries by giving them agency to frame and tell their own narratives and map their own spaces and places in their region. This empowerment is particularly important in the face of overwhelming global interest by powers who seek to draw Oceania into their

14 Susanne Kuehling, “The People of the Sea: Environment, Identity, and History in Oceania (review).” *Anthropological Quarterly* 80, no.1 (2007): 283, <https://doi.org/10.1353/anq.2007.0011>.

15 Upolu Lumā Vaai, “We Are Therefore We Live: Pacific Eco-Relational Spirituality and Changing the Climate Change Story,” *Toda Peace Institute*, Policy Brief no. 56 (October 2019): 9. https://toda.org/assets/files/resources/policy-briefs/t-pb-56_upolu-luma-vaai_we-are-therefore-we-live.pdf; Upolu Lumā Vaai and Unaisi Nabobo-Baba, *The Relational Self: Decolonising Personhood in the Pacific* (Suva: University of the South Pacific Press, 2017).

16 Vaai, “We Are Therefore,” 1.

17 Milja Kurki, “Traversing Webs: Reflections on Relational Theory and International Relations,” *New Perspectives* 30 no. 2 (April 2022): 189 – 197, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2336825X221089191>.

18 Hau’ofa, “Our Sea of Islands,” 148-161.

19 “The 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent,” Pacific Islands Forum, accessed July 12, 2023, <https://www.forumsec.org/2050strategy/>

20 Sasha Davis, *Islands and Oceans: Reimagining Sovereignty and Social Change*: 48, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2020): 61.

maps and agendas.”²¹ Understandings of geography are rooted in coloniality which is mainly concerned with “the geography of international politics, particularly the relationship between the physical environment (location, resources, territory, etc.) and the conduct of foreign policy.”²² As such, “the idea that an island’s identity is defined as being within either the U.S. or the Chinese sphere of influence is still a common point of view as well as a potent part of the geographical imaginary of powerful state actors”²³ and impacts on the Pacific Ocean becoming “increasingly subject to surveillance, intense exploration activities, military manoeuvres, and sovereignty claims of various kinds that attempt to increase the ability of western states to delineate, control, manage, and seek profits.”²⁴

At the most basic level, the different understandings of geography and state between the Pacific people and the major powers are a dilemma.

To understand the moral dilemmas that the Pacific people face with the existing geostrategic competition, it involves reflecting back, it requires silencing the present, and it includes deliberating forward the implications of the past, present and future. And because of that, I ask myself, how ready are we (myself and others) to engage in this discussion?

What should we know?

The Ethical Dilemmas

“Do no harm” is a principle I encountered in my international development work. The “Do no Harm” concept in development was borrowed from the Hippocratic Oath.²⁵ The principle has also been used in the field of research.²⁶ The expression is self-explanatory and is aligned to Pacific values of communal living in a way that does not over-consume from the environment (fa’asao, fa’aola) and the

21 Kabutaulaka, “Mapping the Blue Pacific,” 41-42.

22 Gearóid Ó Tuathail and John Agnew, “Geopolitics and Discourse: Practical Geopolitical Reasoning in American Foreign Policy,” *Political Geography* 11, no. 2 (1992): 190-204.; Sarah A. Radcliffe, and Isabella M. Radhuber, “The Political Geographies of D/ decolonization: Variegation and Decolonial Challenges of/in Geography,” *Political Geography* 78 (2020): 102128.

23 Sasha Davis, *Islands and Oceans*, 94.

24 *Ibid.*, 64.

25 Jean Charancle and Elena Lucchi, “Incorporating the Principle of ‘Do No Harm’: How to Take Action Without Causing Harm: Reflections on a Review of Humanity & Inclusion’s Practices,” *F3E Special Edition, PE 07 – Synthesis*, (2018), https://www.alnap.org/system/files/content/resource/files/main/donoharm_pe07_synthesis.pdf.

26 “The Belmont Report: Ethical Principles and Guidelines for the Protection of Human Subjects of the Research,” US Department of Health and Human Services (1976), last reviewed October 17, 2022, <https://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/regulations-and-policy/belmont-report/index.html>

protection and preservation of life from harm (physical, emotional and spiritual).²⁷ The “Do no harm” principle is universal. Essentially, it is about the protection and sustainability of the ecosystem. In this discussion, I argue that the increasing securitisation of the Pacific due to global competition is morally unethical as the intense militarisation of the region contributes to the ongoing historical and intergenerational distress that the Pacific communities have experienced as a result of colonisation. Given the direct influence of international development policies and practices on the Pacific countries, there are two aspects of the “Do no harm” principle in the development context I would like to expand, as applicable to this discussion. Borrowing from Charancle and Lucchi’s review of Humanity & Inclusion’s practices report, the first “is to avoid exposing people to additional risks through our action” and the second is “taking a step back from an intervention to look at the broader context and mitigate potential negative effects on the social fabric, the economy and the environment.”²⁸

The Pacific people view foreign policy in historical contexts. This means that whilst the geopolitical discourse in the Pacific focuses on the present or near term past and future, the Pacific people think in circular time, bringing the past, the present and the future together – where in Hau’ofa’s words, “the past is ahead, in front of us, is a conception of time that helps us to retain our memories and be aware of its presence.”²⁹ As such, to the Pacific people, the existing intense geopolitical climate is a continued re-enactment of their past, raising concerns for their future. They have previously experienced this power struggle. As such, the heightened focus on competition understood to be military contest,³⁰ is harmful as it creates feelings of anxiety and insecurity within the Pacific communities. For this discussion, I use the dictionary definition of “intergenerational” which means, “including or involving people of different generations or age groups.”³¹

27 The Pacific Islands Forum, <https://www.forumsec.org/who-we-arepacific-islands-forum/>. The genesis of the Pacific Islands Forum is about the political, physical, and spiritual survival.

28 Jean Charancle and Elena Lucchi, “Incorporating the principle of ‘Do No Harm,’” 9, https://www.alnap.org/system/files/content/resource/files/main/donoharm_pe07_synthesis.pdf.

29 Epele Hau’ofa, “Remembrance of Pacific Pasts,” In *Remembrance of Pacific Pasts: An Invitation to Remake History*, ed. Robert Borofsky (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2000), 460.

30 Ian Kemish, “Australia’s Pacific Mindset: Historical Foundations,” *Australian Journal of Politics & History* (May 2023). <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajph.12910>; Fiji Government, “Fijian Minister for Defence Delivers Address at the IISS Shangri-La Dialogue,” YouTube video, 11:01, June 13, 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4hc2Ucywo5c>; Kiritiana Uluwai, “Fiji is Not Anyone’s Backyard Says PM,” FBC News, May 29, 2022, <https://www.fbcnews.com.fj/news/fiji-is-not-anyones-backyard-says-pm/>; Michael G Smith, “How Should Australia Defend Itself in the 21st Century? Silencing the Drums and Dogs of War,” *The New Daily*, May 26, 2023, <https://thenewdaily.com.au/news/world/2023/05/26/how-should-australia-defend-itself-in-the-21st-century-silencing-the-drums-and-dogs-of-war/>.

31 “Intergenerational,” Oxford Learners Dictionaries, accessed July 12, 2023, https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/american_english/intergenerational.

The Pacific people have expressed anxiety regarding the militarisation of the Pacific as reliving the impact of colonisation and their lived experiences.³² For example, Adam Grydehøj and others have documented their views in their paper discussing island perspectives on the ongoing discourse, stating that Western and Metropolitan powers' perception of the "China threat" seeks to "maintain and deepen colonial influence in island societies," referring to their lived experiences in Guåhan/Guam, Kalaallit Nunaat/Greenland, Okinawa, and Jamaica.³³



Aircraft carrier USS Carl Vinson pulling into Naval Base Guam, Santa Rita, Guam (Credit: U.S. Pacific Fleet, Flickr)

Guåhan /Guam is located in Micronesia in the Western North Pacific Ocean. It has the longest history of colonisation in the world. It has suffered Spanish colonialism and Japanese occupation during WWII.³⁴ Today, the US military occupies 29% of the land, displacing indigenous CHamoro people.³⁵ This will potentially increase with the recent US Government announcement of the "largest ever budget request for the Pacific Deterrence Initiative," an investment in "advanced capabilities...for more resilient force posture in the Indo-Pacific region," enabling "groundbreaking posture initiatives in Guam."³⁶ The people of Guam are

32 Grydehøj, et al., "Practicing Decolonial Political Geography"; Tarcisius Kabutaulaka, "Solomon Islands Asserts its Sovereignty – with China and the West," The Lowy Institute, March 31, 2022, <https://www.loyyinstitute.org/the-interpretor/solomon-islands-asserts-its-sovereignty-china-west>.

33 Grydehøj, et al., "Practicing Decolonial Political Geography."

34 Michael Lujan Bevacqua and Kenneth Gofigan Kuper, "Gefpágo Na Dinagi: Decolonization and the Chamorro Language of Guam," In *Self-Determinable Development of Small Islands*, ed. Masahide Ishihara, Eiichi Hoshino and Yoko Fujita (Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2016),

35 Grydehøj, et al., "Practicing Decolonial Political Geography," 5.

36 "Department of Defense Releases the President's Fiscal Year 2024 Defense Budget," US Department of Defense, March 13, 2023, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3326875/departement-of-defense-releases-the-presidents-fiscal-year-2024-defense-budget/>; See also, "Fact Sheet: The President's Budget for Fiscal Year 2024," The White House, March 9, 2022,

externally defined by US strategic imperialism as frontline “first island chain,”³⁷ “an indispensable strategic hub for the US...that “allows the US to successfully project power within the Indo-Pacific region.”³⁸ Without asking to be part of a war, Guahan has become the most likely target, at risk of existential harm. It is no wonder that in the current geopolitical climate, understanding your role is a “projection of power” to others, and whatever that means, is a never-ending nightmare. Summed up by respected academic and community leader Kenneth Gofigan Kuper, “we have experienced being forced in the middle of war conflicts before, with WWII, and we just don’t want something like that to happen again.”³⁹

The people of Solomon Islands are living with the dangerous remnants of WWII in the form of unexploded bombs. In 2016, a Special Report titled, “Solomon Islands’ Explosive Legacy” published by the Journal of Conventional Weapons Destruction stated that, “many of the 500,000 inhabitants still live with unknown quantities of explosive remnants of war (ERW) left behind from combat between Japan and the US during World War II.”⁴⁰ In view of the growing militarisation of the region, Gina Kekea, a renowned Solomon Islands journalist stated in 2021 that, “locals should not be forced to live in fear of the hidden menace still posed by explosive wartime remnants.”⁴¹ Dorothy Wickham, a well-respected Solomon Islands journalist and political commentator, journaled the story of her cousin and a friend who were killed by an unexploded WWII bomb in Honiara, 80 years after the battle of Guadalcanal.⁴² She said she “was shocked and horrified that such an accident would happen in the center of our capital city.”⁴³ These stories are not new and in the existing geostrategic environment, one would ask, why would the people of Solomon Islands accept a contest where a potential outcome (in the form of violent conflict) is not new to them?

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/briefing-room/2023/03/09/fact-sheet-the-presidents-budget-for-fiscal-year-2024/>.

37 “US Policy in the Pacific: The Struggle to Maintain Influence,” US Government Publishing Office, House Hearing, 114 Congress, June 23, 2016, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-114hhrg20532/html/CHRG-114hhrg20532.htm>; See also, Michael Breger, “Frontline Guam: Strategic Deterrence in the Westernmost US Territory,” FSI, Stanford University (July, 2022), <https://fsi.stanford.edu/news/frontline-guam-strategic-deterrence-westernmost-us-territory>; Oriana Skylar Mastro, “Defense, Deterrence, and the Role of Guam,” *Shorenstein APARC*, Stanford University (July, 2022) <https://aparc.fsi.stanford.edu/publication/defending-guam>.

38 Mastro, “Defense, Deterrence, and the Role of Guam.”

39 Kuamnews, “Kenneth Gofigan Kuper Comments on Guam’s Identity and Peace,” interview by Nestor Licanto, YouTube video, 2:29, August 14, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PheSN6T6WEY>.

40 Mette Eliseussen and John Rodsted, “Special Report: Solomon Islands’ Explosive Legacy,” *The Journal of Conventional Weapons Destruction* 20, no. 3, (2016), <https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/cisr-journal/vol20/iss3/7>.

41 Gina Kekea, “Long-ago Battle in Solomon Islands Keeps Claiming Lives,” *The Interpreter*, May 18, 2021, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/long-ago-battle-solomon-islands-keeps-claiming-lives>.

42 Dorothy Wickham, “Solomon Islanders Have the Right to Live Without Fear and Danger,” *Honolulu Civil Beat*, November 20, 2022, <https://www.civilbeat.org/2022/11/solomon-islanders-have-the-right-to-live-without-fear-and-danger/>.

43 Ibid.

Another well-respected journalist, Barbara Dreaver also relayed similar experiences where “decades on from when US Marines fought and won the Battle of Tarawa against Japan, war was still very much a part of everyday life.” Growing up in Kiribati her “grandmother’s leg was badly injured” when an “unexploded ordnance went off” on a beach.

*The Japanese bunkers and US machine gun mounts along the Betio shoreline, and bones are still being found – even today. Stories are told... so many people died...these things are not forgotten.*⁴⁴

Then there are the ongoing horrific stories of the “nuclear age” in the Pacific, not just to the physical environment, but emotionally and spiritually.⁴⁵ When I was 9 years old, in Samoa, I participated in a speech competition. I talked about the unacceptable nuclear testing at Mururoa atoll, a French colony in the Pacific where a total of “193 nuclear experiments (‘experiences nucleaires’) above and beneath the atolls were conducted between July 1966 and January 1996.”⁴⁶ The year 2023 marks,

*77 years of the largest weapon the US has ever tested, the March 1, 1954, Bravo Hydrogen Bomb on Bikini Atoll. At 15 megatons, the blast vaporized 3 islands and was 1,000 times the magnitude of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki nuclear weapons dropped on Japan in World War II. The fallout from this weapon has forever devastated the lives and the lands of the people of the Northern Marshall Islands. 2023 marks 77 years that the people of Bikini Atoll have lived in exile away from their beloved homeland. 20 of the 23 weapons tested by the US on Bikini Atoll from 1946 to 1958 were hydrogen bombs.*⁴⁷

44 Barbara Dreaver, “Analysis: Memories of War Haunt Prospects of a Militarised Pacific,” *1News*, May 22, 2022, <https://www.1news.co.nz/2023/05/22/analysis-memories-of-war-haunt-prospects-of-a-militarised-pacific/>.

45 Nic Maclellan, “The Nuclear Age in the Pacific Islands,” *The Contemporary Pacific* 17, no. 2 (2005): 363–72, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23722064>; See also: Teresia K Teaiwa, “Bikinis and Other s/Pacific n/Oceans,” *The Contemporary Pacific* 6, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 87–109, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23701591>.

46 “The Radiological Situation at the Atolls of Mururoa and Fangataufa,” Main Report by an International Advisory Committee, International Atomic Energy Agency (1998), accessed July 13, 2023, https://www-pub.iaea.org/MTCD/Publications/PDF/Pub1028_web.pdf.

47 bikinijack2, “Congressional Testimony Bikini Resettlement Bill S 2182 February 6, 2018,” YouTube video, 1:15:00, February 8, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uhpQzHhYt7c>

In her article titled, “*bikinis and other s/pacific n/oceans*” Teaiwa wrote that “for Pacific Islanders, the name Bikini evokes memories and visions of a s/pacific historical and contemporary political reality.”⁴⁸

The impact and concerns with the “nuclear age” experience in the Pacific led to the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty, “the Rarotonga Treaty,” which establishes a nuclear-free zone across the 14 Pacific Islands Forum member states.⁴⁹ Both Australia and New Zealand are signatories to the Rarotonga Treaty. Nuclear is a violent word, akin to “coup” in Fiji, or “tensions” in Solomon Islands.⁵⁰ Evidence of harm caused by nuclear⁵¹, the coups in Fiji⁵² and the tensions in Solomon Islands⁵³ are well documented. Of course, this is not a comparison of the magnitude of the impact and/or cost (both human and environmental) of these events but is a demonstration that violent events have lasting harmful consequences.

It is through these lens that Pacific people either object or view the AUKUS agreement between Australia, the UK, and the US with caution. AUKUS was first announced in 2021, and at that time, the former UK Prime Minister, Boris Johnson stated that it was “one of the most complex and technically demanding projects in the world.”⁵⁴ On March 2023, a joint re-announcement of AUKUS stated that this was “a new security partnership that will promote a free and open Indo-Pacific that is secure and stable.”⁵⁵ According to the joint statement, AUKUS is a nuclear-powered submarine pathway that will deliver Australia with a world-class capability. AUKUS creates a dilemma for the Pacific region. AUKUS partners have downplayed the “threat” of AUKUS, as Pacific leaders were not consulted prior to the announcement of this security arrangement, a fact that is concerning for the Pacific people.

48 Teaiwa, “Bikinis and Other s/Pacific n/Oceans,” 87–109.

49 “Treaty of Rarotonga,” United Nations, accessed July 13, 2023, <https://www.un.org/nwzf/fr/content/treaty-rarotonga>.

50 Steven Ratuva, *Contested Terrain: Reconceptualising Security in the Pacific* (Acton: ANU Press, 2019).

51 “Pacific Nuclear Test Archive,” International Disarmament Institute News, accessed July 13, 2023, <https://disarmament.blogs.pace.edu/nuclear-test-archive/>; Maclellan, “The Nuclear Age,” 363–72.; Teaiwa, “Bikinis and Other s/Pacific n/Oceans,” 87–109.

52 Ratuva, “Contested Terrain.”; Jon Fraenkel, “The Fiji Coup and the Politics of Ethnicity,” *Inside Story*, October 7, 2009, <https://insidestory.org.au/the-fiji-coup-and-the-politics-of-ethnicity/>.

53 “The Tensions,” Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands, accessed July 13, 2023, <https://www.ramsi.org/the-tensions/>.

54 Guardian News, “Watch in Full: Biden, Johnson and Morrison Announce Aukus Alliance, Nuclear-powered Submarine Deal” YouTube Video, 11:50, September 16, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O9OSbXjuUU>.

55 “Joint Leaders Statement on AUKUS,” The White House, March 13, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/03/13/joint-leaders-statement-on-aukus-2/>.

In Australia, there is an ongoing debate regarding the lack of transparency and the implications of AUKUS to the people of Australia and the region.⁵⁶

In addition, the “potential nuclear challenge with a leaking Runit Dome in RMI Republic of Marshall Islands, and the proposed nuclear waste discharge by Japan” remains significant concerns for the region.⁵⁷

I personally relate to feelings of anxiety regarding potential violent conflict in the Pacific, as a result of geopolitical posturing. My story is about a woman. She was given the name Tanetau when she was born. Tanetau, in Samoan, literally means war tank. It is not a nice word to name a child. It does not even sound good in the Samoan vernacular. When I asked Tanetau’s mother why she named her child after a war tank, she responded that when her child was born, she could hear war tanks outside the house. In true Samoan beliefs, she named her daughter after a war tank with the hope that the sound of the tanks she heard, would never again be heard in the Pacific. Tanetau is my mother. Never again should any mother or anyone hear the sound of war again!

56 Penny Wong, “AUKUS Won’t Undermine Australia’s Stance Against Nuclear Weapons,” *Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade*, January 23, 2023, <https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/penny-wong/opinion/aukus-wont-undermine-australias-stance-against-nuclear-weapons>; Maria Rost Rublee, “AUKUS: What to do with Nuclear Waste?” *The Interpreter*, April 17, 2023, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/aukus-what-do-nuclear-waste>; Smith, “How should Australia defend itself”; Georgia Hitch, “What is AUKUS and when are we Getting Nuclear Submarines?” ABC News, March 14, 2023, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-03-14/what-is-aukus-submarine-deal-details-announced/102091510>; Paul Keating, “Paul Keating’s Blistering Assault on AUKUS Nuclear Submarine Deal,” ABC News, YouTube Video, 7:20, March 16, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P3m3U-CK8L4>; Carla Mascarenhas, “‘Disgusting’: ABC Rant Sums Up Nation’s Anger on \$368bn Nuclear Submarine Deal,” *News.com.au*, March 15, 2023, <https://www.news.com.au/national/politics/disgusting-abc-rant-sums-up-nations-anger-on-368bn-nuclear-submarine-deal/news-story/137f8a36ef767267f64d40fb6e1699a2>.

57 Henry Puna, “Reflections on Pacific Regionalism, Learnings from the Recent Past,” *Pacific Islands Forum*, June 8, 2023, <https://www.forumsec.org/2023/06/08/remarks-special-address-by-sg-puna-reflections-on-pacific-regionalism-learnings-from-the-recent-past/>; Henry Puna, “Statement: Pacific Islands Forum Secretary General Henry Puna on the Fukushima Treated Nuclear Wastewater,” *Pacific Islands Forum*, June 26, 2023, <https://www.forumsec.org/2023/06/26/statement-pacific-islands-forum-secretary-general-henry-puna-on-the-fukushima-treated-nuclear-wastewater/>.

In the geostrategic contest, relationships and policies have been securitised. For example, the Asia-Pacific, Indo-Pacific as well as the Partners of the Blue Pacific Initiative are viewed by Pacific Leaders as cohesive mechanisms of engagement.

The Pacific Islands Forum Chair, Hon. Mark Brown, the Prime Minister of Cook Islands, in his address at the 2023 Forum for India–Pacific Islands Cooperation (FIPIC), raised concerns with the Partners of the Blue Pacific Initiative, stating that “while we welcome the intent and rationale to establish such a mechanism, we do maintain some concerns with the current design and construct of the initiative in that it must, at the very least, allow for joint consultation and ownership by the region if it is to succeed.”⁵⁸ This is a repeated concern. The Prime Minister of Samoa, the Hon. Fiāme Naomi Mata’afa has raised it since she came into office in July 2022, and more recently during her address at the Lowy Institute in March 2023.⁵⁹

Referring to global competition, Dame Meg Taylor warned Pacific people, that nothing given to them by bigger powers came without owing something in return, “And what is it that we’re going to owe them? Are we going to owe them places for military bases? Are we going to owe them places for their influence and control of the Pacific Ocean? Are we going to owe them so they have access to our resources?”⁶⁰ Pacific Leaders have expressed concerns about respect for their strategic approaches as “friends to all, enemies to none” positions. For example, Dame Meg Taylor, in 2022, stated that any choices had to be those of Pacific Island Countries and Territories and not “drummed up by a lot of other parties” as reported in the “Navigating ‘Flexible, Responsive and Respectful’ Security Cooperation in the Pacific Islands: A 2022 Workshop Report.”⁶¹

Exercising agency over the decisions they make in their national interest, Pacific countries are reaffirming their political and security choices under the banner of “friends to all, enemies to none.” Asserting their leadership, in the words of the Samoan Prime Minister, the Hon. Fiāme Naomi Mata’afa, “I feel I need to be very frank, and to say to this gathering tonight, that in the Pacific, we feel our partners have fallen short of acknowledging the integrity of Pacific leadership, and the responsibility they carry for every decision made as a collective, and individually,

58 “Forum Chair Remarks at the U.S. – Pacific Islands Forum Meeting,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Immigration, Government of the Cook Islands May 22, 2023, <https://mfai.gov.ck/news-updates/forum-chair-remarks-us-pacific-islands-forum-meeting>.

59 Fiamē Naomi Mata’afa, “2023 FDC Pacific Lecture – Lowy Institute,” Government of Samoa, March 27, 2023, <https://www.samoagovt.ws/2023/03/hon-fiamē-naomi-mataafa-2023-fdc-pacific-lecture-lowy-institute/>.

60 Johnny Blades, “Outgoing Pacific Forum Head Warns About External Influences,” RNZ, May 31, 2021, <https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/443728/outgoing-pacific-forum-head-warns-about-external-influences>.

61 Henrietta McNeill, et al., “Navigating ‘Flexible, Responsive and Respectful’ Security Cooperation in the Pacific Islands: A 2022 Workshop Report,” ANU (2023): 6, <https://openresearch-repository.anu.edu.au/handle/1885/287322>.

in order to garner support for the sustainable development of our nations.”⁶² The securitisation of political interests, development policies and foreign relationships means that Pacific people’s priorities are being viewed and interpreted with a geopolitical lens. A story written by Toby Manhire in 2022, quoted the Tuvalu Minister of Justice, Communications and Foreign Affairs stating that, “I think there has not really been enough sustained attention to the Pacific on the part of the mainstream media and the general public throughout the world, and this has led to the impression that ‘superpower’ interest in the Pacific is new or that it is an interest or phenomenon that Pacific nations cannot deal with or do not understand. In reality, we have been seeking Pacific solutions to the positive and negative interests of outside ‘powers’ in our region throughout our history.”⁶³

Ignoring Pacific Leaders’ call to respect their sovereignty through their respective foreign policies for the survival of their communities, in my view, contradicts the basic ethical principle that “individuals should be treated as autonomous agents.”⁶⁴ According to the Belmont “Do No Harm” Report, “to respect autonomy is to give weight to autonomous persons’ considered opinions and choices...”⁶⁵ Although the Belmont Report refers to research, the concept, from my perspective, applies to the autonomous decisions of Pacific people for the survival of their communities.

How shall we act?

Relational security

Geopolitics is primarily concerned with power, which is state power and control or traditionally, it is about how political power is “reinforced or undermined by geographical arrangements.”⁶⁶ Rationalist ideas of power and control focuses on military power and economic power.⁶⁷ Relationality is a “whole of life” philosophical foundations that is able to navigate Pasifika multiple

62 Mataaafa, “2023 FDC Pacific Lecture.”

63 Toby Manhire, “Degrading to Pacific Nations: The View from Tuvalu on Coverage of the Crisis,” *Pasifika New*, June 16, 2022, <https://pasifika.news/2022/06/degrading-to-pacific-nations-the-view-from-tuvalu-on-coverage-of-a-crisis/>.

64 “The Belmont Report,” US Department of Health and Human Services: 4.

65 Ibid.

66 Gertjan Dijink, “Geopolitics and Religion,” In *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography*, ed. Rob Kitchin and Nigel Thrift (Oxford: Elsevier Science, 2009), 453, <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-008044910-4.00778-1>; Jonathan N Markowitz and Christopher J Fariss, “Power, Proximity, and Democracy: Geopolitical Competition in the International System,” *Journal of Peace Research* 55, no. 1 (December 2017): 78-93, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343317727328>; Gearóid Ó Tuathail, “Understanding Critical Geopolitics: Geopolitics and Risk Society,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 22, no. 2-3 (1999): 107-24, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402399908437756>.

67 Alexander Miller, “Realism and Antirealism,” In *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Language*, ed. Earnie Leopore and Barry C. Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 983-1005.

and multidimensional relationships fundamental to Pasifika wellbeing and development, premised on the relational values and spiritualities of the people.”⁶⁸ It is from this holistic and cyclic understanding that Pacific people view power and political economy, not as state centric constructs and I will use examples from Samoa to shine some light on this reality.

As a relational culture,⁶⁹ Samoan people believe and operate on a principle that everyone is a leader. People of Samoa understand and live in the reality that the imposed western construct of the state extends beyond institutions. This means the Samoa political economy includes communities and the institutions of the state as reflected in the Constitution.⁷⁰ Fa’aSamoa, is a formal system of governance; it regulates, educates, protects, and sustains Samoa.⁷¹ Within the Fa’aSamoa, “le va”⁷² a relational principle of protocols and covenants governs a whole of life interconnectedness of the human, environmental and spiritual relationships and values that sustain and secure the society.⁷³ It is an ecosystem grounded in some of the Samoan values of tautua (service) and avafatafata (mutual respect) that survived colonialism. These relational values are necessary for harmonious relationships and existence. From this reality, power is multidimensional. It is present in the form of collaborative leadership, where everyone is a leader and contributes to decision making through soālaupule (collaborative empowerment).⁷⁴ Soālaupule is a Samoan consultative principle

68 “Pasifika Philosophies Course,” Pacific Theological College, accessed July 14, 2023, <https://ptc.ac.fj/pasifika-philosophies-course/>.

69 Samoa communities, similar to other Pacific countries, are embedded, connected to, and have relationships with the land, the sea, and the heavens. These relationships are governed by protocols, generally referred to as ‘le va’. These protocols dictate the relationships and interactions within families, communities, including at national and international levels. For example, all Pacific countries have safeguarded and upheld these values and traditions in their Constitutions. Samoa has legislated the governance of their villages under the Village Fono Act recognising the importance of customs and traditions. Some leading academics in this field, see: Vaai, “We Are Therefore We Live.”; Upolu Lumā Vaai and Unaisi Nabobo-Baba, *The Relational Self: Decolonising Personhood in the Pacific* (Suva: University of the South Pacific Press, 2017); Melani Anae, Airini and Karlo Mila-Schaaf with Eve Coxon, Diane Mara, and Kabini Sanga, *Teu Le Va – Relationships Across Research and Policy in Pasifika Education* (Auckland: The University of Auckland, 2010); Melani Anae, “Teu Le Va: Samoan Relational Ethics,” *Knowledge Cultures* 4(3) (2016):117-130; Konai Helu Thaman, “Vaa: a foundation for peace and inter-cultural understanding,” *International Review of Education*, 54 (3-4). pp. 287-297; Tevita O. Kāili, “Tauhi Va: Nurturing Tongan Sociospatial Ties in Maui and Beyond,” *The Contemporary Pacific* 17, no. 1, (Spring 2005): 83-114. doi:10.1353/cp.2005.0017.

70 “Constitution of the Independent State of Samoa 1960,” Government of Samoa, accessed July 14, 2023, <https://www.samoagovt.ws/publications/>.

71 “Village Fono Act 1990,” Government of Samoa, accessed July 14, 2023, <https://mwcsd.gov.ws/assets/act/Village-Fono-Act-1990.pdf>.

72 Vaai, “We Are Therefore We Live.”; Vaai and Nabobo-Baba, *The Relational Self*; Anae, et al., “Teu Le Va.”; Konai Helu Thaman, “Vaa: a foundation for peace and inter-cultural understanding,” *International Review of Education*, 54 (3-4). pp. 287-297; Koro, McNeill, Ivarature, and Wallis. “Tā, Vā, and Lā.”

73 Vaai, “We Are Therefore We Live.”; Vaai and Nabobo-Baba, *The Relational Self*; Anae, Airini and Mila-Schaaf with Coxon, Mara, and Sanga, “Teu Le Va.”; Konai Helu Thaman, “Vaa: a foundation for peace and inter-cultural understanding,” *International Review of Education*, 54 (3-4). pp. 287-297; Koro, McNeill, Ivarature, and Wallis, “Tā, Vā, and Lā.”

74 Patisepa Tuafuti, “Additive Bilingual Education: Unlocking the Culture of Silence,” *Mai Review* 1, (2010): 1-14; See also: Koro, McNeill, Ivarature, and Wallis. “Tā, Vā, and Lā.”

of collaborative empowerment where soa means two or more, lau means yours and pule means power or authority.⁷⁵ In practice, Samoan people approach all interactions with the acknowledgement that in all forums, those present have the mandate to engage as equals. The people of Samoa understand that relationships is the currency of their being and existence and that their collective responsibility to each other, inclusive of their environment (in the broadest sense), trumps the idea of individualism.⁷⁶

Samoa, like other Pacific countries, inherited western systems of democracy which have complimented existing norms. In the context of foreign policy, Samoa operates within the international rules-based order complemented by the Fa'aSamoa. Fundamentally, engagement is always in the interest of the collective, guided by the Samoan principles of avafatafata and soālaupule.⁷⁷ This is present when Samoa leaders call for “consultation”, and when they request for “respect in their decision making” in their national interests. It is present when they respond in the form of “we are navigating our way through issues.” It is present when they say, “we work with all partners.” It is present when they “push back” on external ideas/policies.

Under the leadership of the Minister of Justice, Communication and Foreign Affairs, the Hon. Simon Kofe, Tuvalu’s Fale-pili concept guides its foreign policy. The principles of Fale-pili are about being a good neighbour and shared responsibilities.⁷⁸ In my conversation with the Hon. Minister on 19 May 2023, he stated that Fale-pili is about collective responsibility. In his view,

*the global context we find ourselves in right now, we need these sorts of values because the world has become so interconnected, that we are even becoming vulnerable to each other’s actions...the world has become a single community. But the challenge we have is that we are still operating on this paradigm of national interest, self-interest and not focussing on the bigger picture, the wellbeing of the whole community. Focussing on the community wellbeing is critical in the time that we are in right now.*⁷⁹

75 Patisepa Tuafuti, “Additive Bilingual Education.”; See also: Maima Koro, Henrietta McNeill, Henry Ivarature, and Joanne Wallis, “Tā, Vā, and Lā: Re-Imagining the Geopolitics of the Pacific Islands,” *Political Geography* 105 (2023/08/01/ 2023): 102931. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2023.102931>.

76 Vaai and Nabobo-Baba, *The Relational Self*.

77 Patisepa Tuafuti, “Additive Bilingual Education,” 1-14; See also: Koro, McNeill, Ivarature, and Wallis. “Tā, Vā, and Lā.”

78 “Statement by the Hon. Simon Kofe at the Regional Conference on Securing the Limits of the Blue Pacific: Legal Options and the Institutional Responses to the Impacts of Sea Level Rise on Maritime Zones, in the Context of International Law,” Pacific Islands Forum, September 9, 2020. <https://www.forumsec.org/2020/09/09/statement-by-the-hon-simon-kofe-at-the-securing-the-limits-of-the-blue-pacific-legal-options-and-institutional-responses-to-the-impacts-of-sea-level-rise-on-maritime-zones-in-the-context-of-interna/>.

79 Hon. Minister Simon Kofe, Tuvalu Minister of Justice, Communications and Foreign Affairs, Recorded personal conversation with

The communal values of respect, reciprocity, shared responsibilities of the Fa'aSamoa and the Fale-pili concept are not unique to Samoa and Tuvalu. Under the leadership of Hon. Nanaia Mahuta, New Zealand's foreign policy is underpinned by "Māori perspectives to enable a richer understanding of the shifting environment in our region. This approach aligns us closely with interests in our Pacific region, fostering a stronger resonance with our Pacific neighbours."⁸⁰ These values and principles are present across Pacific communities. Pacific Leaders have formalised the inclusion of these values and traditions in the 2050 Strategy as the foundational implementation principles for the Strategy.⁸¹ It is the region's response to geopolitical contestation as repeatedly highlighted when Pacific Leaders speak of the importance of regional solidarity. Such values are appreciated as the Pacific Way⁸² or Oceanic diplomacy⁸³ and have been effective principles sustaining the resilience of the regionalism to date.

The Pacific advocacy on climate change and its response to the COVID-19 pandemic reaffirmed the importance of Pacific cultures and principles in their survival. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Pacific Leaders in 2018 endorsed climate change as the single greatest threat to Pacific communities and not geopolitical competition. A major success was the establishment of the Loss and Damage Fund at the 2022 COP27 following decades of leadership from the Pacific.⁸⁴ An analysis undertaken by Joanne Wallis and Henrietta McNeill of the lessons from the Pacific during the pandemic found that "while the impact of the pandemic has been significant in the Pacific, the cautious, cooperative, and community-oriented way most Pacific states and people have responded has avoided worst-case scenarios of high number of infections, overwhelmed health

author, May 19, 2023.

80 Nanaia Mahuta, "Aotearoa New Zealand's Place in a Troubled World: Partnership and Partnering to Deliver International Solutions," *Beehive.govt.nz*, June 9, 2023, <https://www.beehive.govt.nz/speech/aotearoa-new-zealands-place-troubled-world-partnership-and-partnering-deliver-international>.

81 "2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent," Pacific Islands Forum, August 5, 2022, <https://www.forumsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/PIFS-2050-Strategy-Blue-Pacific-Continent-WEB-5Aug2022.pdf>

82 Henry Puna, "Reflections on Pacific Regionalism, Learnings from the Recent Past"; Fiamē Naomi Mataāfa, "Opening Remarks, Special Address Event for PIF SG Henry Puna," Pacific Islands Forum, June 8, 2023, <https://www.forumsec.org/2023/06/08/remarks-samoa-pm-afioga-fiamē-naomi-mataafa-welcomes-sg-puna/>.

83 Salā George Carter, Greg Fry, and Gordon Leua Nanau, "Oceanic Diplomacy: An Introduction," ANU Department of Pacific Affairs, In Brief 2021/23, <https://dpa.bellschool.anu.edu.au/experts-publications/publications/8173/ib-202123-oceanic-diplomacy-introduction>; Marshall J Beier, "Indigenous Diplomacy," In *The SAGE Handbook of Diplomacy*, ed. Costas M. Constantinou, Pauline Kerr, and Paul Sharp (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781473957930>; George Joseph Carter, "Multilateral Consensus Decision Making: How Pacific Island States Build and Reach Consensus in Climate Change Negotiations," *The Australian National University*, September, 2018, <https://openresearch-repository.anu.edu.au/handle/1885/157008>.

84 "What you Need to Know about the COP27 Loss and Damage Fund," United Nations Environment Programme, November 29, 2022, <https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/story/what-you-need-know-about-cop27-loss-and-damage-fund>.

systems, and thousands of deaths.”⁸⁵

Pacific countries support Joanne Sharp’s call for a “more ambitious geopolitical imagination” that seeks to “write against a logic which is always and everywhere tending to write a ‘universal’ to see instead how things might look otherwise.”⁸⁶ As,

for too long, the concept of security has been shaped by the potential for conflict between states. For too long, security has been equated with the threats to a country’s borders. For too long, nations have sought arms to protect their security.

*For most people today, a feeling of insecurity arises more from worries about daily life than from the dread of a cataclysmic world event. Job security, income security, health security, environmental security, security from crime—these are the emerging concerns of human security all over the world.*⁸⁷



Civil Society representatives from the Pacific Islands march through the venue of UN climate change conference COP27, Sharm El-Sheikh, Egypt (Credit: The Lutheran World Federation, Flickr)

85 Joanne Wallis and Henrietta McNeill, “What can COVID-19 tell us about Pacific Resilience?” *Australian Outlook*, Australian Institute of International Affairs, December 4, 2020, <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/what-can-covid-19-tell-us-about-pacific-resilience/>.

86 Joanne P. Sharp, “Geopolitics at the Margins? Reconsidering Genealogies of Critical Geopolitics,” *Political Geography* 37, November 2013: 21., <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2013.04.006>.

87 “Human Development Report 1994,” United Nations Development Program, January 1, 1994: 3, <https://hdr.undp.org/content/human-development-report-1994>.

Conclusion

“You can’t speak what you can’t hear”⁸⁸

Ken Booth long argued that the “theory of security in world politics has long been imprisoned by conservative thinking.”⁸⁹ In the context of geopolitics, “European powers continued in what had become a long tradition of building and projecting military force to compete over access to and control of territory, trade, and resources.”⁹⁰ I agree with Booth regarding the necessity for rethinking security approaches seeing as evidence in the Pacific context highlights that conservative thinking of security, with emphasis on military power, has had dire consequences for Pacific people. It is time for a “Global IR” that “recognises the voices, experiences, and values of all people.”⁹¹ Robbie Shilliam calls for commitment to the science of relationality as it is a living science embraced by Pacific people and many other communities.⁹²

I affirm relational values and the Pacific Way as a means to understand, protect, and engage with Pacific people in the pursuit of security in the region. It is what has sustained our communities and our people.

The conversation on global competition, from my perspective, is not a linear discussion. I had many reflections in trying to put this piece together. This discussion is “light” and not a deep dive of the issues outlined herein or a comprehensive analysis of the ethical dilemmas Pacific people are facing relating to geopolitics as I write this. I have also only managed to provide tangible case studies, but what is missing are the ethical dilemmas related to structural systems and processes. I subtitled this paper, *“he koni mata ko lava e kikila,”* which is my late father’s words of wisdom. In Tokelauan, it means, “humble observer” and that is the underlying idea that this paper is built on – my humble observations of the ethical dilemmas Pacific people are facing as we live in a region with intense geostrategic interest.

Pacific people feel anxious about the whole geopolitical competition. Our interests are not reflected in this contest, and it never has been. History reminds

88 Dione Enari and Sierra Keung “You Can’t Speak What You Can’t Hear’ – how Māori and Pacific Sports Stars are Helping Revitalise Vulnerable Languages,” *The Conversation*, May 18, 2023, <https://theconversation.com/you-cant-speak-what-you-cant-hear-how-maori-and-pacific-sports-stars-are-helping-revitalise-vulnerable-languages-203411> ; See also, Rosalind C. Morris (ed.), *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea*, (New York: Columbia University Press, March 16, 2010).

89 Booth, *Theory of World Security*.

90 Markowitz and Fariss, “Power, Proximity, and Democracy,” 1.

91 Amitav Acharya, “Global International Relations (IR) and Regional Worlds: A New Agenda for International Studies,” *International Studies Quarterly* 58(4), December 11, 2014: 650, <https://doi.org/10.1111/isqu.12171>

92 Robbie Shilliam, “Conclusion.”

us of this dark reality. Much of the narrative, for example, around Asia-Pacific, Indo-Pacific, Partners in the Blue Pacific, including bilateral agreements, talk about shared values. Pacific values are different from metropolitan values; therefore, in subaltern language and borrowing directly from Enari and Keung, “you can’t speak what you can’t hear.”⁹³

The need of the hour is to provide the space for Pacific countries to have their own conversations, internally, with their own people, and regionally, with their own leaders to implement their vision of a Blue Pacific Continent that is “secure, stable, and prosperous.” Some examples would be, equalise foreign policies through respecting the “friends for all” position that Pacific Leaders are pursuing for the survival of their communities. Reframe the use of words and the language in political and policy environments, including media commentary that are pitched for Pacific Island countries to make binary geopolitical choices, for these are viewed as disrespectful to Pacific countries’ sovereignty. Genuinely acknowledge Pacific Leaders’ priorities in the region through action, not just announcements, for implementation of commitments that ensure the security and stability of the region. Pacific countries have repeatedly stated that climate change is the threat. Therefore, upholding international commitments that addresses this existential threat to the region, and the world is in everybody’s interest. The response to mitigating actions to climate change, including the loss and damage agenda, is far too slow. Engage in deepening understanding and relationships with Pacific communities to develop the region with shared responsibilities through collaborative empowerment. Pacific Leaders have repeatedly called for transparency through proper consultations in decisions made in the Pacific region by global powers, but with little effect. This is a historical practice; it is rhetoric when global powers say they “listen.” It is often assumed that global powers know what is best for the people of the Pacific. Consult as equal partners before decisions are made in the Pacific that impacts Pacific communities. In acknowledging the autonomous agency of Pacific people, *it is advisable not to talk over us, make assumptions about us, speak for us, and/or act for us*. Above all, emphasise peace for the Blue Pacific Continent and not war. Relational security is securing Pacific people, inclusive of their intergenerational worldviews, their relationality to land, ocean, self, and with each other.

93 Enari and Keung, “You Can’t Speak What You Can’t Hear”; [See also, Morris \(ed.\), Can the Subaltern Speak?](#)

About APLN

The Asia-Pacific Leadership Network for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament (APLN) is a Seoul-based organisation and network of political, military, and diplomatic leaders and experts from across the Asia-Pacific region working to address global security challenges, with a particular focus on reducing and eliminating nuclear weapons risks.

The mission of APLN is to inform and stimulate debate, influence action, and propose policy recommendations designed to address regional security threats, with an emphasis on nuclear and other WMD (weapon of mass destruction) threats, and to do everything possible to achieve a world in which nuclear weapons and other WMDs are contained, diminished, and eventually eliminated.



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