

# Nuclear Justice for the Marshall Islands in the Age of Geopolitical Rivalry in the Pacific

*Patrick Kaiku*

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**Mr. Patrick Kaiku** is a full-time teaching fellow in the Political Science Strand at the University of Papua New Guinea. His research interests are diplomacy and Pacific politics. Mr. Kaiku was an East-West Center participant from 2009 to 2011. Mr. Kaiku holds a Bachelor of Arts from the University of Papua New Guinea, where he majored in Political Science. Through the Asian Development Bank Government of Japan scholarship, he pursued an MA postgraduate qualification in Pacific Islands Studies from the University of Hawaii at Manoa.

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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](mailto:apln@apln.network)

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**Cover Photo:** Children playing in Majuro, Marshall Islands (Credit: Stefan Lins, Flickr).



# Nuclear Justice for the Marshall Islands in the Age of Geopolitical Rivalry in the Pacific

Patrick Kaiku

Lecturer in Political Science, University of Papua New Guinea

## Abstract

The nuclear age came to the Pacific Islands under the legitimizing cover of colonial tutelage. In their colonised positions, colonised subjects were powerless to confront the destruction unleashed on their island habitats. From 1946 to 1958, the United States conducted a total of 67 atmospheric nuclear tests on the atolls of Bikini (23 tests) and Enewetak (44) in what is now the Republic of the Marshall Islands.<sup>1</sup> This paper juxtaposes the nuclear legacy of the Marshall Islands within the current rhetoric of geopolitical rivalry between competing powers in the region. The nuclear legacy in the Marshall Islands will, for the foreseeable future, serve as a reminder that the Pacific Islands can easily become a “playground” for nuclear-armed great powers. Attaining nuclear justice for the peoples of the Marshall Islands will mean the Pacific Islands as a region is enlisted to support the *National Nuclear Commission Strategy for Coordinated Action 2020-2023*, a collective effort at illuminating the lived realities of peoples least acknowledged in the global discussions about great power rivalry and nuclear disarmament.

## Introduction

In the 2016 documentary film, *The Coming War on China*, award-winning Australian journalist John Pilger took to various locations in the Asia-Pacific, in what he perceives as frontlines in the looming geopolitical showdown between the United States and China. Divided into chapters, the documentary film introduces the audience to “five possible front-lines across Asia and the Pacific.”<sup>2</sup> Some of the sites include atoll communities in the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI).

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1 U.S. Embassy in the Republic of the Marshall Islands, “The Legacy of U.S. Nuclear Testing and Radiation Exposure in the Marshall Islands”, 15 September 2012, <https://mh.usembassy.gov/the-legacy-of-u-s-nuclear-testing-and-radiation-exposure-in-the-marshall-islands/>

2 John Pilger, “The Coming War on China,” released December 5, 2016 at Dartmouth Films, United Kingdom, video, 1:52:53.



Pilger's documentary film is a useful starting point. The nuclear past of the Marshall Islands remains complicit in any current and future great power configurations in the Pacific. Presently, the Marshall Islands is a constant reminder of the unresolved efforts towards ensuring that nuclear justice, and ultimately, the peace and stability of the Pacific is achieved. The Pacific as a region, therefore, remains an important stakeholder in nuclear justice advocacy in the Marshall Islands.



US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo holds a joint press availability with the leaders of COFA states: Micronesia President David Panuelo, Marshall Islands President Hilda Heine, and Palau Vice President Raynold B. Oilouch, in Kolonia, Federated States of Micronesia, on August 5, 2019 (Credit: Ron Przysucha, US Department of State, Flickr)

In the deterrence thinking that guided the United States in the development and testing of nuclear weapons, the Pacific was to be a beneficiary in America's immediate sphere of influence. American leaders seem to have been convinced that the deterrence effect of the American nuclear arsenal had generated peace and prosperity in the region since the end of the Second World War.<sup>3</sup> A logic of this sort, therefore, complicates nuclear justice, especially where governments in the region have strong diplomatic and security ties with the United States.

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<sup>3</sup> Admiral Ronald Hays, then Commander in Chief U.S. Pacific Fleet, once said, "I believe that there is a growing appreciation for what nuclear weapons are all about in the South Pacific. Nuclear weapons are for peaceful purposes, to maintain the peace through deterrence. That's our fundamental policy." (see Alister Barry, "A Nuclear Free Pacific - Niuklia Fri Pasifik," released 1988 at Vanguard Films, video, 55 minutes). It is this view of the role of nuclear deterrence that is troubling, especially for small states in the Pacific Islands who may not feel that they should be part of any geopolitical entanglement with other nuclear-armed states in this region, and beyond.

The United States is integral to the economic and strategic considerations of some of its partners in the Pacific. For instance, in the Micronesian sub-region, Palau, Federated States of Micronesia and the Marshall Islands have respective Compacts of Free Association (COFA) arrangements with the United States.<sup>4</sup> For Australia and New Zealand, the Australia, New Zealand and United States Security Treaty – the so-called ANZUS Treaty signed in 1951 entangles New Zealand and Australia within the United States security umbrella.<sup>5</sup>

When it is used in the context of the Marshall Islands, nuclear justice entails “the need to heal ourselves and our land [and it is] what makes us feel strong and emboldened to act, and the ability to teach our children about their unique history.”<sup>6</sup> Advocacy for nuclear justice in the Marshall Islands spans more than six decades. Raising the profile of nuclear justice has taken various forms and platforms, and reflective of the multifaceted nature of the issue, it has fused with other equally pressing agendas in both the regional and global arena. In the present climate change discussions, one cannot speak of the displacement of islanders as a result of sea-level rise without acknowledging the equally detrimental impact that nuclear testing rendered to the islands in the Marshall Islands.<sup>7</sup>

When islands in the Marshall Islands face the prospect of submerging under water, and Marshallese populations are being relocated to other parts of the country due to sea level rise, the conversations around destruction of islands through the nuclear testing by the United States cannot be discounted. Marshallese climate change activist, Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner once stated: “I think it’s really telling that the ocean is rising and it is making this nuclear waste leak out because in a lot of ways this climate change issue has also been revitalising a lot of

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4 The Compact of Free Association (COFA) consists of three separate bilateral treaties the United States concluded with the Federated States of Micronesia, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, and Palau in 1986. These treaties provide “immigration privileges” for the citizens of the three Micronesian countries to the U.S., “U.S. direct economic assistance, and exclusive American defense and security access to the islands and their territorial waters.” See JJ Rose, “U.S. nuclear tests hang over Marshall Islands treaty talks, *NikkeiAsia*, 17 October 2022, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/U.S.-nuclear-tests-hang-over-Marshall-Islands-treaty-talks>

5 Article IV of the ANZUS Security Treaty reads: “Each Party recognizes that an armed attack in the Pacific Area on any of the Parties would be dangerous to its own peace and safety and declares that it would act to meet the common danger in accordance with its constitutional processes.” This is an overt declaration of a collective action against a potential common aggressor.

6 “*Nuclear Justice for The Marshall Islands*

*A Strategy for Coordinated Action FY2020-FY2023*,” The Marshall Islands National Nuclear Commission (Majuro: National Nuclear Commission, 2019), 8, <https://rmi-data.sprep.org/system/files/RMI%20NNC%20Strategy%202019.pdf>

7 Dan Zak, “A Ground Zero Forgotten: The Marshall Islands, Once a U.S. Nuclear Test Site, Face Oblivion Again,” *The Washington Post*, November 27, 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/sf/national/2015/11/27/a-ground-zero-forgotten/>

conversations about our nuclear legacy.”<sup>8</sup> The discussions around sea level rise are relevant because they underscore the legacy of man-made destruction caused by nuclear testing in the Marshall Islands. The United States must take greater responsibility and ownership because the effects of this historical injustices will not go away easily. As communities in the Marshall Islands face the dual challenges of sea-level rise, surrounded by radioactively contaminated atolls, the United States will have to come to terms with its past activities in this part of the Pacific.

Taking ownership of the legacy and the enduring effects of nuclear testing has been highlighted in the recent statement at the conclusion of the 2023 Pacific Church Leaders’ Development Conference, Majuro. The Pacific Church Leaders’ issued a call for “states responsible for nuclear testing in the Pacific to take responsibility for their legacy of destruction and commit to equitable reparations.”<sup>9</sup>

In the *National Nuclear Commission Strategy for Coordinated Action* (hereafter, “*NNC Strategy*”), the stated endpoint in nuclear justice initiatives is about restoration and taking ownership of the nuclear legacy of the Marshall Islands. It is worth noting that the Republic of Marshall Islands has accumulated, over the decades, a wide array of experience in its advocacy work on nuclear justice. From its peoples’ collective experiences and institutional memories of their advocacy organisations, the *NNC Strategy* was created. The *NNC Strategy* is a coordination toolkit for the planning of nuclear justice activities for the Marshall Islands and it was generated through an estimated 100 consultative meetings over an 18-month period with Marshallese peoples and stakeholders, prominent advocates on nuclear justice and external partners.<sup>10</sup>

Earmarked as a guide for the years 2020 to 2023, the *NNC Strategy* was overseen by the Republic of Marshall Islands Nuclear Commission, a statutory entity established under the *National Nuclear Commission Act of 2017*. One of the mandates of the National Nuclear Commission is to “develop a detailed strategy and plan of action for pursuing justice as concerns the [U.S. nuclear testing] Program and its effects.”<sup>11</sup>

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8 ABC News, “This Concrete Dome Holds A Leaking Toxic Timebomb,” YouTube Video, 41:34, November 27, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=autMHvj3exA>, see also, Jessica Faucher, “Nuclear Displacement: Effects of America’s Nuclear Tests on Pacific Islanders,” *PANDION: The Osprey Journal of Research and Ideas*, 2(1), Article 8 (August 2021), [https://digitalcommons.unf.edu/pandion\\_unf/vol2/iss1/8](https://digitalcommons.unf.edu/pandion_unf/vol2/iss1/8)

9 Pacific Conference of Churches - NCCA, “Pacific Church Leaders’ Statement at the Conclusion of the 2023 Pacific Church Leaders’ Development Conference, Majuro,” *National Council of Churches in Australia*, June 1, 2023, [Pacific Conference of Churches - NCCA](https://www.pacificconferenceofchurches.org/)

10 “*Nuclear Justice for The Marshall Islands*,” The Marshall Islands National Nuclear Commission: 2.

11 “*Nuclear Justice for The Marshall Islands*,” The Marshall Islands National Nuclear Commission: 5.

For nuclear justice to be realised, the *NNC Strategy* must be implemented comprehensively and in its entirety. Nuclear justice is envisaged in the *NNC Strategy* to mean:

*...when the health of the Marshallese people and our islands is restored, when displaced communities are returned to or compensated for their homelands, when the full range of damages and injuries stemming from the program is acknowledged and compensated by the U.S. Government, when the record of adverse impacts from nuclear weapons testing is preserved for the benefit of humankind, and when every Marshallese citizen understands the activities that took place in our islands and their aftermath and feels empowered to use their voice to advocate for the needs of their communities.*<sup>12</sup>

In a nutshell, the *NNC Strategy* is a result of cumulative lessons from decades-long struggle for nuclear justice. More importantly, it addresses what matters to the Marshall Islands communities.

In this paper, I discuss the legacy of the nuclear tests in the RMI, and the attempts for nuclear justice to be attained. Nuclear justice is not simply about material compensation for the negative effects of nuclear tests in the RMI. It involves the humanising of a people, a culture, and an island civilisation.

There is a moral voice that Marshallese peoples speak from in their decades of advocating for nuclear justice. Moreover, the stigma of being labelled “atom islands” relegates a proud and resourceful people to a position of dependency, subservient to the designs of great powers in the region. Humanising a peoples has implications in dealing with the current scramble for influence in the region by powerful states.

This discussion is primarily a desktop review of the extensive literature on the subject of anti-nuclear testing in the Pacific region. Most of what is known about nuclear justice, and the legacy of nuclear testing in the Pacific islands are well documented. This paper is a follow up of the important publication from this series by Milla Vaha.<sup>13</sup>

This discussion will be organised as follows. Firstly, a brief overview of the lasting implications of nuclear testing will be discussed. Important studies and in-depth analysis have been made of the chronological and tangible effects of nuclear tests

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>13</sup> Milla Vaha, “The Pacific’s Nuclear Legacy in the Context of the Climate Crisis,” *Asia-Pacific Leadership Network*, March 2023, <https://cms.apln.network/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Milla-Vaha-The-Pacifics-Nuclear-Legacy-in-the-Context-of-the-Climate-Crisis.pdf>



in the Marshall Islands. For the purposes of this discussion, the most significant priorities of the Marshall Islands, in its quest for nuclear justice, will form the basis for this section. For instance, the dislocation of the Marshallese from their islands has had a heavy toll on the collective trauma of the islanders. This legacy of nuclear testing needs a specific policy response that may not necessarily entail only financial compensation.

The second part of this discussion will address the context that necessitates the need for nuclear justice. Amidst the rhetoric of geopolitical rivalry, and the carving up of the Pacific into geostrategic demarcations (e.g., the Indo-Pacific), how does the outstanding agenda of nuclear justice feature in these discussions? Most Pacific Island states are signatories to the Rarotonga Treaty. With the present alignment of security partners and discussions around agendas such as AUKUS, are the lessons from the Marshall Islands' quest for nuclear justice relevant to the debate?

To provide some context, it is worth reviewing the key narratives and framing exercises that went into justifying the irreversible destruction and displacement of human communities in the Marshall Islands. Understanding how Marshallese communities were portrayed within the vastness of their oceanic environment is useful to unpacking the arrogance of the United States in using the atolls as test sites for the nuclear weapons.

## **The Legacy of Nuclear Testing in the Marshall Islands**

The Marshall Islands' geographic location is a key determinant in its enduring relevance to the United States' long-term strategic and security interests.<sup>14</sup> This was apparent during the 1970s to the 1980s period when the terms of the COFA with the United States were being negotiated. Enlisting the Marshall Islands into the long-term strategic agenda of the United States and retaining the Marshall Islands within the American sphere of influence is consistently pursued by the United States.<sup>15</sup>

Conversely, Marshallese leaders and politicians realise the leverage they possess and exercise agency in their bargaining with the United States on various matters, including that of nuclear reparations.<sup>16</sup> Every decade since the end of the Second

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<sup>14</sup> "Ambassador Zackios' Statement for the Hearing on 'Strategic Importance of the Pacific Islands,'" <https://www.rmiembassyus.org/news/ambassador-zackios-statement-for-the-hearing-on-strategic-importance-of-the-pacific-islands>

<sup>15</sup> To read more on the protracted nature of the negotiations during the 1970s to the 1980s over access to Kwajalein and the final outcome of the Compact of Free Association, see Martha Smith-Norris, *Domination and Resistance: The United States and Marshall Islands during the Cold War*, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2016).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

World War, the level of commitment by the United States to the Marshall Islands continues to change depending on the geopolitical priorities of the United States in the global arena. Robert Underwood, for instance, documents how, during the aftermath of the end of the Cold War and the late 1990s, the Micronesian sub-region seemingly was off the focus of American strategic policy. It was only after the 9/11 tragedy that Micronesia was propelled back into the limelight and in the US's overall "Global War on Terror" calculations.<sup>17</sup> So, one cannot talk about advocating nuclear justice to an American audience, without acknowledging long-term American interests in the region.

Glossing over the legacy of nuclear testing in the Pacific is a slap in the face for the Marshallese peoples. Atolls in the Marshall Islands were used to project the post-World War II dominance of the United States as global hegemon. It was on these atolls that "America wanted the world to know that it was strong"<sup>18</sup> through its series of nuclear tests. The United States irreversibly destroyed island communities on its way to global nuclear power status.

Geographically, the RMI is a collection of mostly atolls in the northern Pacific Ocean, spread over an ocean space of over 750,000 sq. miles. The relative isolation and remoteness "from large centres of population and with no political power to veto the decisions of colonial powers, the Pacific islands offered convenient locations for the initial atmospheric nuclear testing programs of nuclear weapon states with colonial territories in the region."<sup>19</sup> Considered a space that is sparsely populated and consistent with how colonised subjects were perceived by administering powers within those times,<sup>20</sup> the inconsiderate attitude towards Marshallese peoples was evident.<sup>21</sup>

The country's strategic value is unlikely to diminish with time, especially in the context of the Sino-American rivalry. The best illustration of this is the importance of the Kwajalein Missile Range to American military planning. Unfortunately, the utility of the Marshall Islands will also be informed by the stark reminders of the legacy of nuclear tests in previous decades. Nuclear testing in the Pacific Islands was premised on the notion that an ocean as vast as the Pacific, sparsely populated by exotic peoples and cultures, would have limited negative effects.

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17 Robert Underwood, "Pacific Security: A Micronesian Perspective," In *Securing a Peaceful Pacific*, ed. John Henderson and Greg Watson (Christchurch: Canterbury University Press, 2005), 26-32.

18 Stewart Firth, *Nuclear Playground*, (North Sydney: George Allen & Unwin, 1987)

19 Michael Hamel-Green, *The South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty: A Critical Assessment*, (Canberra: Australian National University, 1990), 83, <https://openresearch-repository.anu.edu.au/bitstream/1885/111864/1/b17628490.pdf>

20 Nic Maclellan, "Nuclear Testing and Racism in the Pacific Islands," In *The Palgrave Handbook of Ethnicity*, ed. Steven Ratuva (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 885-905. doi:10.1007/978-981-13-2898-5\_74.

21 Nic Maclellan, "The Nuclear Age in the Pacific Islands," *The Contemporary Pacific*, 17(2), (2005), 363-372, doi:10.1353/cp.2005.0062.

Framed by the negligibility of the uninhabited oceanic environment, one-time foreign powers, in their capacity as administrators of the island territories, used the islands as test sites for their nuclear armaments.

Within the lens of nuclear justice, what specific aspects of the history of the Marshall Islands should inform efforts at righting the wrongs of its nuclear legacy?

Nuclear tests in the Pacific Islands resulted in the irreversible uprooting of islanders from their communities. The notion of “nuclear nomads” aptly describes a peoples permanently displaced and unable to ever return to their island homelands.<sup>22</sup> Owing to the unknown levels of contamination of their islands from radioactive materials, some islanders belonging to the atolls previously used as test sites in the Marshall Islands are still unsure of reconnecting with their island homes.<sup>23</sup>



People of Enewetak, who had been resettled on Ujelang Atoll at the time, preparing to board the LST 827 to “cruise” around the ocean as the US Navy launched Operation Ivy nuclear test in 1952 (Credit: Jack Tobin, Library Digital Image Collections)

22 Jonathan M. Weisgall, “The Nuclear Nomads of Bikini,” *Foreign Policy*, 39 (Summer 1980): 74–98. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1148413>

23 Nancy Pollock, “Nuclear Contamination of Food in the Pacific - Lifting the veil of secrecy,” *Pacific Ecologist*, 22 (Summer 2013): 21-25, <https://pacificecologist.org/archive/22/pe22-food-contamination.pdf>

The physical attributes of displacement are quantifiable for purposes of compensation and retribution. But in the case of the Pacific Islands, where identity and cultural affinity is tied to place and land, there is a psychological and emotional dimension of nuclear justice that must be accounted for. As concluded by Nancy Pollock:

*Compensation is only a partial solution. Certainly, that money may soften the hardship of dispossession, ill-health and contaminated environments, but it can never bring complete reparations. Bravo and the US nuclear testing programme are a 20th-century landmark, but they also mark the infliction of terrible damage and disruption to people's lives and environment.<sup>24</sup>*

Pacific Islanders' value connections to space and the identities of Pacific peoples are grounded in physical spaces. Attaching monetary value to the dispossessions of Marshallese from their islands glosses over the likely cultural disconnection to lands and ancestral landmarks. To truly comprehend the level of anxiety associated with place displacement, one need not look further than that faced by potential "climate refugees" in the region.<sup>25</sup> The present discussions around Pacific islanders dealing with the imminent threat of losing their islands due to a rise in the sea level point to the stress and hopelessness of leaving islands permanently. It is additional justification for the thorough and in-depth knowledge of islander connection to their homelands, and the appropriate interventions to deal with the loss of cultural connection.

Uncertainties with cultural continuity and the disruptions of the Marshallese cultural connection to their islands have traumatic side-effects. Communicating the Pacific and Marshallese aspects of spiritual and cultural connection to place, especially to an American audience, is also fraught with challenges. Realistically, how can an American policymaker or Congressperson understand spirituality and connections, as felt by Pacific Islanders to their cultural space? As it is, messaging and communication, especially of sensitivities to cultural matters, seems to be implicit in the *NNC Strategy*.

With the long history of advocacy for nuclear justice in the Marshall Islands, nuclear justice can basically devolve down to the Marshallese struggle to inform the world of its traumatic past. The Marshallese fight for nuclear justice is a lonely battle for any small state that is marginal to global agendas.

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<sup>24</sup> Nancy Pollock, "US Nuclear Testing in the Marshall Islands," In *Securing a Peaceful Pacific*, ed. John Henderson and Greg Watson (Christchurch: Canterbury University Press, 2005), 334.

<sup>25</sup> Kirstie Wellauer, "Federal Court Arrives On-Country for Climate Change Fight in the Torres Strait," ABC News, June 5, 2023, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-06-05/federal-court-torres-strait-grave-sites/102421066>



There is limited global public knowledge<sup>26</sup> about the Marshallese plight. This is not unusual. Pacific island states are mostly invisible in conversations about global agendas, and there are limitations in any useful diplomatic medium to inform a global audience about the plight of small island states. It is from this global obscurity that the renewed efforts at nuclear justice advocacy work are happening. The wording of the *NNC Strategy* reveals that “there is no single avenue for nuclear justice” for the Marshall Islands. A coordination of the wide array of creative medium available in the region and beyond is therefore envisaged in the *NNC Strategy*.

One of the main reasons why the legacy of nuclear testing in the Pacific Islands fails to gain traction in global discussions is because issues of this sort fail to gather publicity within the region and beyond. Given the secrecy of the testing, and the cover-ups that is associated with reducing bad publicity to maintain the global image of the United States, there is relatively little information known about Marshall Islands and the role Marshall Islands played in the testing of nuclear weapons.<sup>27</sup> This, perhaps, explains why there is an emphasis on education and awareness in the *NNC Strategy*.

The *NNC Strategy* evokes a moral and universalist tone in its appeal, seeking to enlist the support of stakeholders and like-minded parties and coordinate any nuclear justice campaign with a singular approach. In effect, as long as the remnants of nuclear testing exist in the Marshall Islands, they will forever be deployed as a constant reminder to the United States and the role of the latter in destroying the pristine atolls of the Marshall Islands. Also important in the tone of the *NNC Strategy* is the hint that the Marshall Islands also seeks to break away from the American patronage, towards attaining some sense of independence and self-reliance. The creation of the *NNC Strategy* began with the lofty goal that generations of Marshall Islanders are better informed of the lessons in nuclear justice.

Nuclear justice is also intrinsically a reckoning with the past, where some formal process of closure and accountability are brought to bear on the past perpetrators of reckless nuclear testing in the Pacific. The Marshall Islands is a reminder of how the global configuration of power after the Second World War in the Pacific

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26 In comparison, when the Chernobyl disaster happened on April 26, 1986, it received widespread publicity. The US Central Intelligence Agency even produced a “video briefing” for President Reagan on the disaster. In the video, Chernobyl was called the “biggest nuclear accident in history.” The former Soviet Union is depicted as an irresponsible nuclear power with unreliable safety standards in the management of its nuclear facilities. An incident happening in Europe, in a territory occupied by a rival superpower (the USSR), is reckless use of power. This is the level of moral inconsistencies.

27 For a vivid account of the racialised and secretive contexts surrounding the US nuclear tests in the Marshall Islands, see, Adam Jonas Horowitz, “Nuclear Savage: The Islands of Secret Project 4.1,” released November 16, 2011, at Primordial Soup Company and Equatorial Films, video, 1:27:00.

sealed the fate of certain Pacific states. Collectively designated under the category of a “strategic trust territory” by the United Nations Security Council,<sup>28</sup> Micronesia’s “strategic” use ultimately served the purpose of being militarised and used as the site for the series of nuclear tests, especially in the Marshall Islands.<sup>29</sup> Fully implementing nuclear justice in good faith faces serious challenges. The chaotic and almost disjointed nature of information declassification within government agencies in the United States frustrates the updating of scientific data for use in the rehabilitation of affected islands in the Marshall Islands.

An observation by the Public Interest Declassification Board was that, “Although the U.S. government has undertaken a number of declassification projects specifically related to the U.S. nuclear testing in the Marshall Islands, department and agency efforts in releasing information about the tests and cleanup [*sic*] activities have been disjointed, singular, and transactional.”<sup>30</sup> What the United States is implicitly communicating is that it does not consider the case of the Marshall Islands with any sense of urgency or as a matter of priority for their compensation.

The *NNC Strategy* is illuminating, most notably in the target areas earmarked for advocacy purposes”. The five pillars are indicators of what Marshallese communities have endured for decades living with the trauma and consequential effects of the nuclear testing that happened on their atolls. The five pillars in the *NNC Strategy* are self-reinforcing and comprehensive: Compensation, Health Care, Environment, National Capacity, and Education and Awareness.

For instance, compensation seeks to deal with the health defects and environmental degradation of the atoll communities. National capacity reflects the aspirations of the Marshallese to develop the abilities of their citizens to understand the radioactive pollution in their islands. There is, perhaps, a realisation that it is costly for external parties to be involved in monitoring and tracking the nuclear waste challenges in the Marshall Islands. The use of the five pillars of nuclear justice in this *NNC Strategy* is an overt expression of the Marshall Islands seeking to chart a conclusively long-term and independent approach to the nuclear legacy in the Marshall Islands.

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28 “United Nations Charter, Chapter XII: International Trusteeship System,” United Nations, accessed July 27, 2023, <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter/chapter-12>

29 Stewart Firth, *Nuclear Playground*.

30 Public Interest Declassification Board, “Declassification of Records Relating to Nuclear Weapons Testing and Cleanup Activities in the Marshall Islands Feasibility Study,” National Archives and Records Administration, August 2022, 18, <https://www.archives.gov/files/pidb/recommendations/marshall-islands-feasibility-study-2022-.pdf>

There is perhaps also a realisation of the need to reimagine a Marshallese image beyond the stigma of being a “nuclear laboratory.” From its long history of advocating for nuclear justice, the Marshallese are perhaps emboldened to take ownership of their own course. In a coordinated effort, the *NNC Strategy* demonstrates that relying on the failed promises of the United States has never been beneficial in dealing with the legacy of nuclear testing.

Upgraded healthcare intervention is also needed to deal with non-communicable diseases (NCDs) within Marshallese communities. Because of the contamination in some atolls and the long history of heavy dependence on imported foodstuff, Marshallese communities have developed dietary complications and an uptick in NCDs.<sup>31</sup> Studies are only now drawing the direct correlation among the radioactive contamination of some part of the islands from nuclear testing, the multiple relocations of islanders from contaminated islands and the failure of food source diversity in the atolls of the Marshall Islands to that of diseases such as diabetes.<sup>32</sup>

Jessica Faucher, for instance, notes the reported cases of multiple relocations that Bikini inhabitants had to take due to the contamination of their atolls. Faucher concluded that American officials overseeing these abrupt changes “did not take the time necessary to thoroughly understand the cultural significance of Bikini Atoll to its inhabitants or the resources it offered; instead, the Americans assumed surrounding islands offered the same amenities.”<sup>33</sup>

The loss of cultural values associated with agricultural and fishing skills – useful for a healthy subsistence living – are irreversibly lost. As dislocation of human habitation occurred and the degradation of the land due to radioactive contamination<sup>34</sup> was experienced, the Marshallese resorted to processed and imported food sources. The dependence on cheaply manufactured foodstuff is an unintended consequence of the destruction of erstwhile self-reliant communities.<sup>35</sup>

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31 Dan Diamond, “They Did not Realize we are Human Beings,” *Politico*, January 26, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2020/01/26/marshall-islands-iowa-medicaid-103940>

32 Pearl Anna McElfish, et al., “Health Beliefs of Marshallese Regarding Type 2 Diabetes,” *American Journal of Health Behaviour* (March 2016); 40(2): 248–257. doi:10.5993/AJHB.40.2.10

33 Jessica Faucher “Nuclear Displacement: Effects of America’s Nuclear Tests on Pacific Islanders,” *PANDION: The Osprey Journal of Research and Ideas*, 2(1), [https://digitalcommons.unf.edu/pandion\\_unf/vol2/iss1/8](https://digitalcommons.unf.edu/pandion_unf/vol2/iss1/8)

34 Pollock, “Nuclear contamination of food in the Pacific.”

35 Food security in the Marshall Islands is also problematic because of the introduction of cheaply manufactured foodstuff through the import duty-free benefits under the Marshall Islands’ Compact of Free Association with the United States. The unintended consequences of decades of American engagement with the Marshall Islands, and the legacy of its nuclear testing and continued militarisation must be understood in its entirety. See for instance, Hawaii Appleseed Center for Law and Economic Justice, *Broken Promises, Shattered Lives - The case for justice for Micronesians in Hawaii* (Honolulu: Hawaii Appleseed Center for Law and Economic Justice, 2011), <https://evols.library.manoa.hawaii.edu/items/113bf37c-2742-48c5-bee4-b988155c6990>

Marshall Islands is a micro-state. Land-based resources and availability of sustainable farming for natural food sources would be highly coveted.<sup>36</sup> However, from its overall total land area of 70 square miles, it is estimated that “20% of this is ‘uninhabitable due to former US nuclear testing or current military use.’”<sup>37</sup> The Ronald Reagan Missile Test site on Kwajalein, for instance, sits on prime land, cut off from access for use in food production for the Marshallese.



Ronald Reagan Ballistic Missile Defense Test Site, Kwajalein Atoll, Marshall Islands (Credit: Carrie David Campbell, US Army Space and Missile Defense Command, Flickr)

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36 Merze Tate and Doris M. Hull note that the forced transfer of Bikini islanders was most pronounced in their need to acclimatise to the food production habits of their new habitat: “Bikini has a larger land area than has Kili, which for its part has heavier rainfall and richer soil. Further, the Bikini people were forced to learn new methods of cultivating food plants had grown in their former habitat,” 381. see, Merze Tate and Doris M. Hull, “Effects of Nuclear Explosions on Pacific Islanders,” *Pacific Historical Review*, 33(4), (November, 1964), 379-393, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3636039>

37 See Appendix A, in Ravi Reddy, Cherie Shehata, Garrett Smith, Gregory G. Maskarinec, “Characteristics of Marshallese with Type 2 Diabetes on Oahu: A Pilot Study to Implement a Community-Based Diabetic Health Improvement Project,” *California Journal of Health Promotion*, 3(4) (2005):36-47. doi:10.1901/jaba.2005.3-36.



## Nuclear justice and its manifestations

Elements of anti-nuclear sentiments are embedded in the regional consciousness of the Pacific Islands. For instance, Palau's nuclear-free Constitution is framed and informed by the memories of the destructive aspects of nuclear technology unleashed in the neighbouring Marshall Islands. At the regional level, the nuclear-free Pacific movement in the 1980s were informed in large part by the lessons from the Marshall Islands, and of course, French Polynesia.<sup>38</sup>

At its climax, the anti-nuclear testing agenda coalesced with the decolonisation movement in the early 1970s in the Pacific.<sup>39</sup> Galvanising regional support towards addressing issues such as nuclear justice is not a novel idea. For nuclear justice to be a reality, the challenge is to expand its current appeal. It must be framed as a truly regional issue of relevance to the survival of all Pacific Island communities.

Presently, the language of the *NNC Strategy* designates the Marshall Islands as potentially the main initiator of nuclear justice initiatives, with other Pacific Islanders relegated to being passive audience in the issue.<sup>40</sup> The Marshall Islands is perceived as unilaterally taking on the United States on the issue of nuclear justice. However, there is a serious need for enlisting and co-opting the Pacific Islands region into the nuclear justice struggle. Treated as a regional agenda, more partners and states from within the Pacific region will give additional voice and weight to the campaign.

To illustrate: an inclusive point for the framing of nuclear justice as a regional issue is to make a case for nuclear wastes and the pollution of the Pacific Ocean.<sup>41</sup> Leftover radioactive materials from nuclear testing in Bikini or Enewetak in the Marshall Islands pose a serious threat to the Pacific Ocean if sea levels continue to rise and these atolls are submerged.<sup>42</sup> The fear in the Pacific is that the pollution of the ocean is inevitable.<sup>43</sup>

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38 In the case of the regional response to French nuclear testing in French Polynesia, see Maclellan, "The Nuclear Age in the Pacific Islands."

39 The anti-nuclear movement in the Pacific was able to draw the connection between "indigenous self-determination, decolonisation and political independence" because "Western powers could only test nuclear weapons in the Pacific because they were colonial powers in the region", see Nic Maclellan, *Grappling with the Bomb: Britain's H-Bomb Tests*, 4-5.

40 The "Education and Awareness" Pillar of the *NNC Strategy* (5.1.3) recommends collaboration with the "relevant CROP agencies (Pacific Islands Forum, Pacific Community, University of the South Pacific, Pacific Regional Environment Program) to develop information materials to educate Pacific Island audiences."

41 Jon Mitchell, *Poisoning the Pacific - The US Military's Secret Dumping of Plutonium, Chemical Weapons, and Agent Orange* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2020).

42 Ibid.

43 "Pacific Elders' Voice statement on Oceans," *Pasifika Environews*, April 8, 2022, <https://pasifika.news/2022/04/pacific-elders-voice-statement-on-oceans/>

The point here is to make nuclear justice an agenda for the region, and ensure that the Marshall Islands can maximise on its diplomatic output if regional multilateral institutions and like-minded states in the Pacific see the relevance of this issue to their own national interests. The Marshall Islands cannot fight a lonely battle against a global hegemon. It must use creative ways of framing a messaging campaign, targeting and enlisting the support of other states in its neighbourhood.

More importantly, the idea of reclaiming a sense of dignity and correcting the narrative of the Marshall Islands as a peoples with a proud and self-reliant existence is pronounced in the *NNC Strategy*.

The *NNC Strategy* emphasises that:

*The U.S. has never apologized to the people of the Marshall Islands for the weapons testing program. There are no monuments or memorials devoted to the sacrifices of the Marshallese. Most American citizens have no idea what the U.S. did in the Marshall Islands, including experimentation on Marshallese people to help the U.S. build weapons of mass destruction.*

There is a hint that trust and open dialogue about the stigma of being used as “guinea pigs” in a “radiation experiment”<sup>44</sup> be made in good faith. The United States must own up to its part in the destruction and displacement of atoll communities. This could be the critical gesture for any realistic advancement of the agenda on nuclear justice in the Marshall Islands.

Concurrently, the United States is upgrading its presence and diplomatic engagements in the Pacific Islands, venturing beyond its traditional sphere of influence in Micronesia (northern Pacific) into the southern Pacific. The United States has to firstly deal with its outstanding legacy of nuclear testing in the Marshall Islands to be treated as a credible stakeholder in the South Pacific. Secondly, the geopolitical rivalry in the region is also a useful entry point for the Pacific region and Marshall Islands to shine the light on the outstanding issues of nuclear justice.

The United States, much like other big powers within the Pacific region, has credibility issues. How it is trusted as a useful partner in the context of the US-China rivalry will depend on it fulfilling its outstanding commitments to nuclear justice priorities in the Pacific, and specifically, the Marshall Islands. To illustrate the point, the announcement in September 2022 of the AUKUS security

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44 “Chapter 12: The Marshallese,” Department of Energy Openness Report, accessed July 6, 2023, [https://ehss.energy.gov/ohre/roadmap/achre/chap12\\_3.html](https://ehss.energy.gov/ohre/roadmap/achre/chap12_3.html)

cooperation between Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States was met with critical responses from some quarters in the Pacific.<sup>45</sup> It will strain historically hard-fought anti-nuclear consensus in the region.

Significantly, a landmark treaty in the Pacific Islands is the 1986 South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty, or the Treaty of Rarotonga, was explicitly informed by “the South Pacific’s first-hand experience with nuclear weapons testing.”<sup>46</sup> It was one of the regional reactions to nuclear testing in the Pacific. Eleven State parties, including Australia and New Zealand, are members of the Rarotonga Treaty. AUKUS is simply a reopening of old wounds.<sup>47</sup> For Marshallese and Pacific Islanders who were affected by previous nuclear testing, and where outstanding compensations and reparations of previous nuclear activities are not settled, it is almost an affront for informed Pacific Islanders that nuclear-related aspects of AUKUS are mentioned. Conversely, not only is the geopolitical rivalry generating an increased visibility of small island states to the strategic considerations of bigger powers, but the opportunities for anti-nuclear positions are also becoming apparent.

The *NNC Strategy* is realistically tailored to the condition and experience of the Marshall Islands in its 60 years of fighting for nuclear justice from the United States. In the context of education and awareness, there are also possibilities to fully comprehend the psychological and spiritual aspects of islanders in their displacement and traumatic experiences living with the after-effects of nuclear testing in their islands. As island peoples attest in the current discussions around climate change, there are traumatic implications associated with permanent displacement from one’s home.

Countering the belittling narratives and stereotypes of island communities, and documenting the worldview of Marshallese and Pacific Islanders in their quest to confront the injustices perpetrated on their islands can be a priority for Pacific scholarship. Pacific Islanders who share the same oceanic environment and are sympathetic to the cause of the Marshall Islands are reliable allies in the area of knowledge generation and scholarly collaborations.

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45 Pita Ligaiula, “Pacific Elders’ Voice Urges Pacific Leaders to Take a Decisive Stand on AUKUS,” *Fiji Village/PACNEWS*, April 13, 2023, <https://pina.com.fj/2023/04/13/pacific-elders-voice-urges-pacific-leaders-to-take-a-decisive-stand-on-aukus/>

46 “Treaty of Rarotonga,” United Nations Platform for Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zones, accessed August 1, 2023, <https://www.un.org/nwzf/content/treaty-rarotonga>

47 Nic Maclellan, “AUKUS Disrupts “a very Peaceful Part of Planet Earth”, *Chain Reaction*, no. 141, (December 2021): 26, [https://assets.nationbuilder.com/friendsofearthmelbourne/pages/6435/attachments/original/1645596811/Chain\\_Reaction\\_Summer\\_2022.pdf?1645596811](https://assets.nationbuilder.com/friendsofearthmelbourne/pages/6435/attachments/original/1645596811/Chain_Reaction_Summer_2022.pdf?1645596811)

The National Nuclear Commission pre-empted how research and representation of the nuclear issue have historically been exploitative, rather than empowering:

*Researchers and journalists often publish their narratives about the Marshall Islands to advance their own careers. The viewpoints of researchers and instructors impact public perspectives about the Marshall Islands. It is the Marshallese people, not visitors, who live with the consequences of circulated narratives. In no way does the NNC want to influence the findings of independent research; please be mindful, however, that one-dimensional portrayals of the Marshallese people as victims harms efforts to bolster resilience and self-reliance.<sup>48</sup>*

More studies and academic interventions can be used for this specific area in ensuring that nuclear justice is holistic and fulfilling for Marshall Islanders. The scholarship and academic exchanges within the region is a useful medium for a generation of Pacific Island academics and scholars to collaborate within the nuclear justice space. One of the useful recommendations in the “Education and Awareness” Pillar of the *NNC Strategy* is for the “relevant CROP agencies (Pacific Islands Forum, Pacific Community, University of the South Pacific, Pacific Regional Environment Program) to develop information materials to educate Pacific Island audiences.”

Exchange of ideas and research collaborations between Pacific Island scholars and researchers on nuclear justice, ocean management and indigenous knowledge are possible pathways to build a network of Pacific scholars who have a deep understanding of these issues. Their Pacific Island connection can help illuminate their unique issues and forward the agenda of nuclear justice. If the issue of nuclear justice is truly a regional agenda, a generation of Pacific Islanders ought to be engaged in generating the information and knowledge to support this campaign.

## **Conclusion**

Nuclear justice is not simply a case of material compensation and monetary needs of peoples affected by the effects of nuclear testing in the Marshall Islands. It must involve the projection of empowering and counteractive narratives of Pacific connections to land and ocean, and the identities of island communities. The United States not only tempered with the atolls in its series of nuclear tests in the

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<sup>48</sup> “Nuclear Research Protocol \_ English Version – Nuclear Legacy Research Guidelines,” National Nuclear Commission of the Republic of the Marshall Islands, accessed July 14, 2023, <https://rmi-data.sprep.org/resource/nuclear-research-protocol-english-version>



1940s-1950s. It was a betrayal of the custodianship that Marshallese communities have had over their island environments for centuries. This is perhaps the missing element in the *NNC Strategy*, and one American official should be made to understand. Also, the Pacific Islands remains restless and the uncertainty of its status as a stable and peaceful region is apparent in the face of tectonic shifts in the geopolitical power plays between nuclear-armed great powers. The Marshall Islands and their ongoing fight for nuclear justice is a constant reminder that unresolved matters exist. The *NNC Strategy* is a useful tool for enlisting the support of an informed Pacific Islands region to collectively pursue peace through the denouncement of nuclear power plays in the region, and beyond.

## 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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