

## Pacific Islands' Views of Security in an Age of Great Power Competition

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### Introduction

In 2023 the Pacific Islands Forum<sup>1</sup> released its first Pacific Security Outlook Report. The report described an “increasingly contested” region, with the United States and its allies seeking to maintain the regional dominance they have held since the colonial era and China “seeking to advance its own strategic agenda.”<sup>2</sup>

This new era of great power competition is occurring against the backdrop of a changing regional order and an increasingly assertive Pacific diplomacy, wherein island states seek to proactively address the pressing security and development challenges they confront.<sup>3</sup>

Concern about the growing “strategic uncertainty” generated by great power competition in part led to a concerted effort by the Pacific Islands Forum to define a new security agenda for the region in 2018.<sup>4</sup>

In keeping with this, Fiji’s then-Foreign Minister, Ratu Inoke Kubuabola, argued that given “the current fluidity of the geopolitical environment...(w)e need to be able to demonstrate what our strategic interests and objectives are, in the face of competing external interests, which may or may not be complementary to the achievement of our vision for our Region.”<sup>5</sup>

The Pacific Islands Forum’s Framework for Pacific Regionalism spelled out this vision as a “region of peace, harmony, security, social inclusion and prosperity, so that all Pacific

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1 This is a regional intergovernmental organization comprising 16 Pacific island states plus Australia and New Zealand. Leaders meet at an annual summit and its headquarters (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat) are based in Suva, Fiji.

2 Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, *The Pacific Security Outlook Report 2022/2023*, (Suva, 2023): 14.

3 Greg Fry and Sandra Tarte, eds, *The New Pacific Diplomacy*, (Canberra: ANU Press. 2015).

4 Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, *The Pacific Security Outlook Report 2022/2023*, (Suva, 2023): 14.

5 Sandra Tarte, “Reconciling Regional Security Narratives in the Pacific,” *East Asia* 4, no.2 (May 2021): 29-43.

people can lead free, healthy and productive lives.”<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, the Boe Declaration on Regional Security adopted in 2018 by Pacific Islands leaders in Nauru at their annual Forum summit articulated “an expanded notion of security,” with a focus on environmental and human security. Since then, as noted in the recently released Pacific Security Outlook report, the region’s security environment has become more complex, with increased geopolitical competition adding to the security challenges facing the region.

### **Introduction Navigating Strategic Uncertainty**

While Pacific Islands views of security do not revolve around great power competition, the geopolitical context of the broader region – especially in an era of heightened competition between great powers – does elevate threat perceptions around certain issues. At the same time, great power competition is perceived by Pacific Islands states as providing some opportunities to advance or address their own national and regional security priorities.

From the perspective of the Pacific Islands states, risks that arise from growing great power rivalry include the emergence of new and the intensification of existing military and nuclear threats. This outlook on the geopolitical environment sees threats to the region’s nuclear free status and increasing traditional and non-traditional security concerns.

For historical reasons, the nuclear issue resonates widely in the region. For example, the Republic of Marshall Islands (RMI) is particularly concerned with nuclear legacy issues—the result of hosting years of U.S. military nuclear testing.

On one level, this is a bilateral matter between RMI and the U.S. government. But the Pacific Islands Forum also called for the United States to “meaningfully address the ongoing impacts of the nuclear testing program.”<sup>7</sup> Additionally, Australia, Fiji, Vanuatu, Samoa, and Nauru backed a proposal by the RMI to the UN Human Rights Council calling for the intervention of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights on the nuclear testing issue.

The proposal, tabled in 2022, calls for the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights to provide technical assistance to the Marshall Islands’ National Nuclear Commission in its efforts to pursue “nuclear justice” as well as “transitional justice.” It

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6 Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, *The Framework for Pacific Regionalism*, available at: [https://www.forumsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Framework-for-Pacific-Regionalism\\_booklet.pdf](https://www.forumsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Framework-for-Pacific-Regionalism_booklet.pdf).

7 Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, *Communique of the 50th Pacific Islands Forum Leaders Meeting*.

also calls for a report to be submitted to the Council in September 2024.<sup>8</sup>

Meanwhile, reflecting longstanding anti-nuclear policy in the region, ten Pacific Islands countries have now ratified the Treaty for the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. There are continued calls for the United States to ratify the protocols to the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty.

For similar reasons, Pacific Islands states also share strong opposition to Japan's planned discharge of treated nuclear wastewater from the Fukushima nuclear power plant into the Pacific Ocean.

Likewise, the nuclear-powered submarine agreement that was announced in 2021 by AUKUS members, Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, caused widespread concern in the region.<sup>9</sup> As a result of this agreement, Australia will become the seventh country to operate nuclear-powered submarines, utilizing technology that will reportedly "put the country's navy on a technological par with China."<sup>10</sup>

It is no surprise that China seeks to stoke regional concerns about AUKUS. Meeting with his Pacific Islands counterparts at the inaugural China-Pacific Foreign Ministers meeting in October 2021, China's Foreign Minister warned that the AUKUS agreement would "create risks of nuclear proliferation... cause an arms race, and jeopardize regional peace and stability."<sup>11</sup>

China has positioned itself as a friend of the Pacific on nuclear issues more broadly. The joint statement from the Foreign Ministers' Meeting expressed the two sides' firm commitment to the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty of 1985, calling on the relevant parties "to fulfill treaty obligations and promote regional peace."<sup>12</sup> The United States is the only major nuclear weapons state that has not yet ratified its signature to the Treaty protocols.

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8 Pita Ligaiula, "Marshall Islands takes U.S nuclear legacy to the Human Rights Council," *Pacific News Service*, October 5, 2022, <https://pina.com.fj/2022/10/05/marshall-islands-takes-u-s-nuclear-legacy-to-the-human-rights-council/>.

9 For example, see Kiribati government response: Stan Grant, "Kiribati President says AUKUS nuclear submarine deal puts Pacific at risk," ABC News, September 27, 2021, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-09-28/kiribati-president-criticises-australia-defence-submarine-deal/100495894>. For more recent responses see: "AUKUS is 'going against' Pacific nuclear free treaty - Cook Islands leader," *Radio New Zealand*, March 28, 2023, <https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/486868/aukus-is-going-against-pacific-nuclear-free-treaty-cook-islands-leader>.

10 Kiran Stacey and Dan Sabbagh, "Aukus submarine deal: Australia expected to choose UK design, sources say," *The Guardian*, March 8, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/mar/08/uk-to-unveil-nuclear-submarines-deal-with-australia-sources-say>.

11 Deng Xiaoci, "China warns against AUKUS, to make meetings routine with Pacific island countries, enhancing ties to higher level," *The Global Times*, October 21, 2021, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202110/1236961.shtml>.

12 "Inaugural China-Pacific Foreign Ministers' Meeting Sheds Light on Beijing's Pacific Islands Strategy," East-West Center, December 2, 2021, <https://www.eastwestcenter.org/news/east-west-wire/inaugural-china-pacific-foreign-ministers-meeting-sheds-light-china-s>.

Defending the ocean from nuclear contamination aligns with a broader regional maritime security agenda, which highlights both environmental and economic concerns. Pacific Islands states have long been concerned about defending their exclusive economic zones from what is broadly referred to as Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) fishing. But maritime boundaries are also increasingly violated by other threats, namely transnational organized crime.

Much of the region's stepped-up security and defense cooperation with Western partners focuses on protecting maritime boundaries. Such cooperation is increasingly taking place with Australia, New Zealand and the United States, as well as Japan and France.

This mutual focus on protecting maritime boundaries reflects a congruence of interests in an era of great power rivalry. Pacific Islands' national security interests around curbing IUU fishing and transnational crime complement the interests of Western partners in expanding maritime surveillance and patrols in the Pacific to monitor or curb Chinese and other non-Western naval activity. That Pacific Islands naval and law enforcement capacity is augmented and strengthened by Western partners precludes the need for any Chinese support.

But threats to the territorial integrity and maritime boundaries of Pacific Islands states also arise from less conventional sources. These include climate change-related changes in sea levels and threats to maritime zones. Defending and securing maritime boundaries—by ensuring baselines remain fixed in the face of climate-induced sea-level rise—has become a priority issue for the Pacific Islands Forum states. The threat to maritime boundaries from climate change has been on the Pacific Islands Forum agenda at least since 2014 and was highlighted in a PIF Declaration adopted in 2021.<sup>13</sup> The PIF is seeking international support for its position to create a new global norm for preserving maritime zones.

Pacific Islands countries are working both individually and collectively to advance this agenda. Tuvalu's 2020 Foreign Policy, *Te Sikulagi*, declares that any country intending to form relations with Tuvalu must “recognize the statehood of the nation as permanent and its existing maritime boundaries as set, regardless of the impacts of sea-level rise.”<sup>14</sup>

In 2022 the President of the United States hosted the first ever summit of Pacific leaders in Washington DC. The Declaration on U.S.-Pacific Partnership, adopted at

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13 Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, Declaration on Preserving Maritime Zones in the Face of Climate Change-related Sea-Level Rise, <https://www.forumsec.org/2021/08/11/declaration-on-preserving-maritime-zones-in-the-face-of-climate-change-related-sea-level-rise/>.

14 Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, Statement by the Hon. Simon Kofe at the Regional Conference on 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 International Law, <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/>.

this summit, highlighted the issue of maritime boundaries, giving strong and explicit support to Pacific concerns:

“It is essential that maritime zones and the rights and entitlements that flow from them must be maintained without reduction, notwithstanding any physical changes connected to climate change-related sea-level rise, recognizing that small island developing states (SIDS) and other coastal States have planned their development in reliance on their rights to such maritime zones.”

The Declaration on U.S.-Pacific Partnership also recognized “threats posed by climate change-related sea-level rise to regional security, peace, prosperity, and development.”<sup>15</sup>

This declaration reflects a broader shift that has taken place in the way the region’s traditional partners now engage with the Pacific. For the most part regional partners now embrace and endorse the security narrative of the Pacific Islands states, wherein environmental security and specifically threats of climate change and sea level rise feature as the defining security issues for the Pacific Islands.

Australia and New Zealand are both signatories to the Boe Declaration which recognizes climate change as the region’s “single greatest threat.”<sup>16</sup> As members of the PIF, Australia and New Zealand also joined Pacific Islands leaders in declaring a “Climate Emergency” that is threatening the “livelihoods, security and wellbeing” of people in the region.<sup>17</sup>

Indeed, the language in the Declaration on U.S.-Pacific Partnership could not have been stronger:

“We take the climate crisis as the highest priority of our partnership, for it remains the single greatest existential threat to the livelihoods, security, traditional and customary practices, and wellbeing of people in the Pacific region, including as reflected in the Boe Declaration on Regional Security.”<sup>18</sup>

What is evident to many Pacific Islands observers is that geopolitics played a major role in driving this shift. “Australia’s renewed commitment to the Forum’s climate change priorities” (as noted in the 2022 PIF Communique) and the “eagerness to engage” of the United States (along with that of Japan, France, New Zealand, and Britain) all reflect anxiety about the prospect that strengthening relations between China and Pacific Islands

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15 White House Briefing Room, Declaration on U.S.-Pacific Partnership, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/09/29/declaration-on-u-s-pacific-partnership/#:~:text=Together%20we%20will%20strengthen%20our,peace%2C%20prosperity%2C%20and%20development.>

16 Boe Declaration on Regional Security available at: <https://www.forumsec.org/2018/09/05/boe-declaration-on-regional-security/>.

17 Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, Communique of the 51st Pacific Islands Forum Leaders Meeting, <https://www.forumsec.org/2022/07/17/report-communique-of-the-51st-pacific-islands-forum-leaders-meeting/>.

18 See Footnote 14.

countries will erode the West's strategic dominance in the region.<sup>19</sup>

In other words, geopolitical tensions have benefitted the Pacific Islands states' efforts to address climate change and related security priorities such as maritime security and disaster preparedness "by drawing much needed attention and resources to the Pacific."<sup>20</sup>

However, geopolitical competition simultaneously poses a threat to the region's climate change goals and ambitions.

The former President of the Federated States of Micronesia, David Panuelo, has stated on several occasions, including at the UN, that all countries and especially the major powers need to work together and treat climate change "as a distinct and non-political matter for discussion and cooperation."<sup>21</sup>

Yet the track record shows that cooperation on these issues quickly breaks down in the face of geostrategic tensions and competition, as made evident in 2022 when China suspended climate talks with the United States in protest of U.S. Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan.

Moreover, it is possible that climate change threats will only intensify in light of the "race to economic growth at the heart of the US-China competition."<sup>22</sup> Prioritizing geostrategic and geoeconomic competition over multilateral efforts to mitigate climate change has significant opportunity costs. These tradeoffs have been highlighted with respect to nuclear militarization. As Fiji's then-Prime Minister, Voreqe Bainimarama, pointed out in 2022: "Nuclear weapons epitomize the same short-sightedness that created the climate crisis, worsened the pandemic, and kept food from the hungry. Worse, their staggering expense cripples our response to these challenges."<sup>23</sup>

### **Advancing in the Blue Pacific Agenda**

Pacific Islands nations have made clear they do not want the region to become "the

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19 Gerard Finin and Terence Wesley-Smith, "Biden's summit with Pacific leaders is a direct response to China – but the US should tread carefully" *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/sep/28/bidens-summit-with-pacific-leaders-is-a-direct-response-to-china-but-the-us-should-tread-carefully>.

20 Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, *The Pacific Security Outlook Report 2022/2023*, (Suva, 2023) 23.

21 "Micronesia leader pleads with US, China to work to save the planet," *Radio New Zealand*, September 23, 2022, <https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/475351/micronesia-leader-pleads-with-us-china-to-work-to-save-the-planet>.

22 Terence Wesley-Smith, "A New Cold War? Implications for the Pacific Islands," in Graeme Smith and Terence Wesley-Smith (eds) *The China Alternative: Changing Regional Order in the Pacific Islands* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 2012), 74.

23 Nic Maclellan, "Forum Leaders Meet to Consolidate Blue Pacific Agenda," *Islands Business*, July 2022, Special Edition, 13.

epi-center of a future confrontation” between the superpowers.<sup>24</sup> As noted earlier, the vision of the region as spelled out in the Pacific Islands Forum’s Framework for Pacific Regionalism is “a region of peace, harmony, security, social inclusion and prosperity, so that all Pacific people can lead free, healthy and productive lives.”

In order to realize this vision, Pacific Islands countries assert their own distinct framing of their strategic environment. This is captured in the Blue Pacific narrative, first endorsed by Pacific leaders at their 2017 PIF summit, which seeks to underpin collective action and strengthen regional solidarity. The Blue Pacific narrative recognizes the need to act as one Blue Pacific continent, based on the Pacific’s shared ocean stewardship.

In 2022, PIF leaders adopted a comprehensive Blue Pacific strategy as the “overarching blueprint to advance Pacific regionalism for the next three decades.” Amongst other things, the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent calls for a “flexible and responsive” regional security mechanism to be in place, to address traditional and non-traditional security issues.<sup>25</sup>

This provides an opportunity for the Pacific to determine how the region will maintain and advance its “strategic autonomy.” Pacific Islands states generally do not want to be forced to choose sides in the strategic competition between the United States and its allies on the one hand and China on the other.

This is the basis to the “friends to all, enemies to none” approach adopted by a number of Pacific Islands leaders as the “accepted modality for engagement and for building relationships and partnerships.”<sup>26</sup>

It is likely that there will be challenges maintaining said posture in the context of a fluid geopolitical environment and in the face of “increased partner engagement in the security sector.”<sup>27</sup> In fact, it has been argued that “the more intense the U.S.-China competition grows, the more difficult it will be for Pacific leaders to exercise agency, preserve their independence, and avoid committing to one side or the other.”<sup>28</sup>

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24 “Micronesia leader pleads with US, China to work to save the planet,” *Radio New Zealand*, September 23, 2022, <https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/475351/micronesia-leader-pleads-with-us-china-to-work-to-save-the-planet>.

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

26 Dame Meg Taylor, Secretary-General, Pacific Islands Forum, “Opening Remarks,” in Graeme Smith and Terence Wesley-Smith (eds) *The China Alternative: Changing Regional Order in the Pacific Islands* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 2012), xiii.

27 Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, *The Pacific Security Outlook Report 2022/2023*, (Suva, 2023): 14.

28 Terence Wesley-Smith and Graeme Smith, “Introduction: The Return to Great Power Competition,” in Graeme Smith and Terence Wesley-Smith (eds) *The China Alternative: Changing Regional Order in the Pacific Islands* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 2012), 17.

A key challenge in advancing the Blue Pacific agenda will be to maintain flexibility to choose from a range of development and security partnerships. A related challenge will be to promote a regional order where the major powers—especially China and the United States—can work together, in partnership with the Pacific Islands countries, to address national and regional priorities such as climate change and maritime security.

### **Conclusion**

Pacific Islands countries will need to pay more attention to the implications for their region of escalating tensions between the United States and China. In this context, the region should highlight and strengthen its own approaches to managing the pressures of geopolitical competition. The mechanisms in place to do this include the Pacific Islands Forum, the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent, the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty and the Boe Declaration on Regional Security. These can supplement and support both subregional and national security approaches, ensuring Pacific Islands economic and security priorities, and not zero-sum great power rivalry, define the rules of engagement in the region.

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