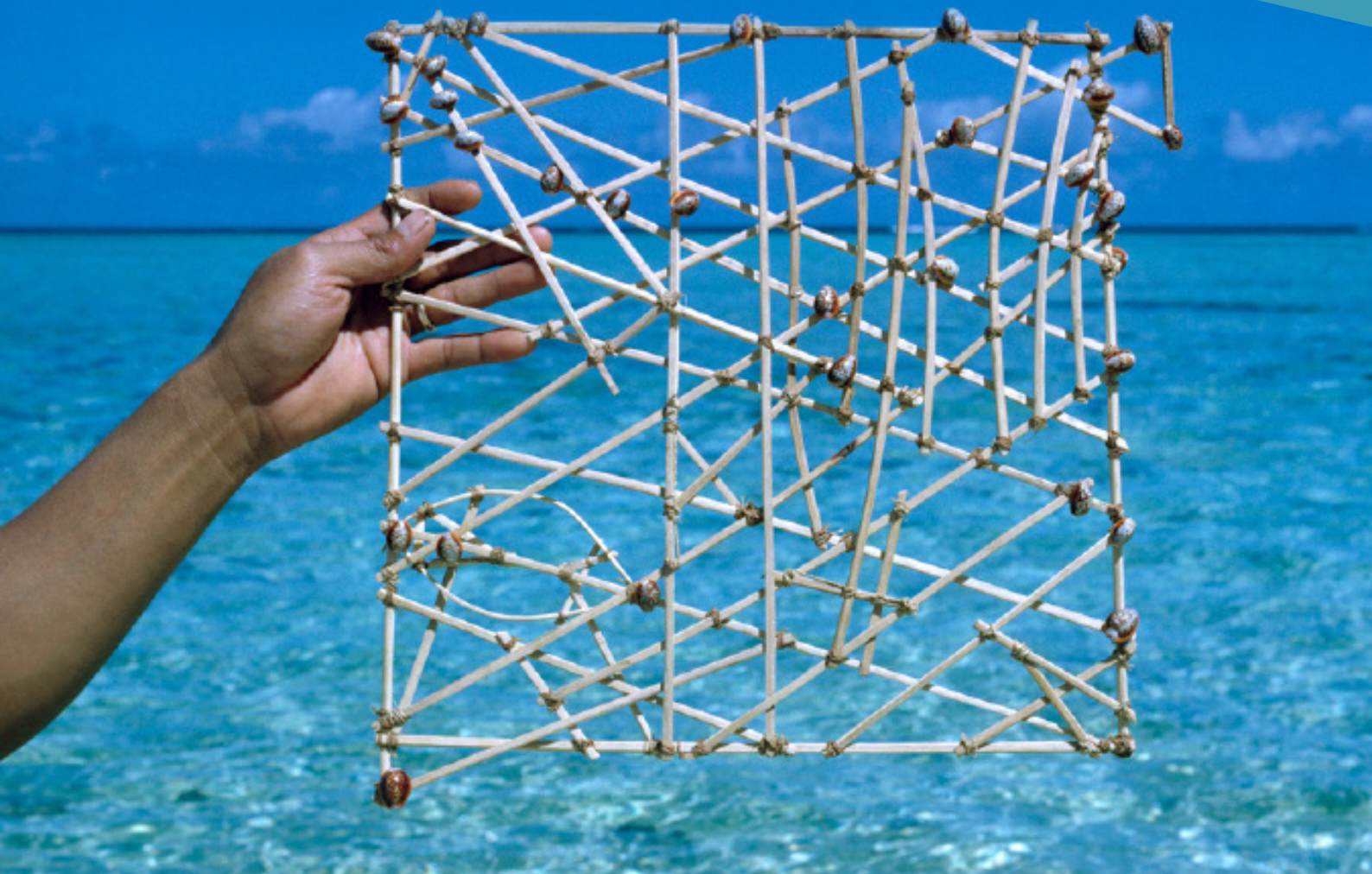


Navigating Nuclear Legacies, Climate Change, and Geopolitics in the Pacific Islands

Project Report

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The Asia-Pacific Leadership Network for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament (APLN) is a network of political, military, and diplomatic leaders from countries across the Asia-Pacific tackling security and defence challenges with a particular focus on addressing and eliminating nuclear weapon risks.

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Executive Summary

The Pacific Islands are at the crossroads of multiple existential threats. Afflicted by hundreds of nuclear and radioactive material tests by powerful nuclear weapons states from 1946 to 1996, the region continues to suffer the intergenerational human and environmental effects of those tests. In response, Pacific states have made continuous efforts to keep their region nuclear-free, including the establishment of the South Pacific Nuclear-Free Zone (SPNFZ). In recent years, however, they find themselves navigating the escalating geopolitical competition and growing militarism of major powers, and an aggravating climate crisis, making the region increasingly precarious and highly contested.

Despite a renewed geopolitical focus on the region, Pacific voices remain underrepresented within wider regional and global conversations on issues that directly and indirectly affect them. There is an urgent need to engage and amplify Pacific voices on threats presented by climate change, past and present nuclear weapons policies and practices, and the geopolitical competition. In July 2022, the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network for Nuclear Non-proliferation and Disarmament (APLN) launched a project titled “Nuclear Disarmament and the Anthropocene: Voices from Pacific Island Countries,” with support from the Ploughshares Fund. The project has aimed to engage and promote perspectives from the region to draw international attention to the impacts of climate change and contemporary nuclear policies on the Pacific Islands, and to raise global awareness of the shared responsibility to address these human and environmental security challenges.

This report presents key insights from the project, drawn from publications and events commissioned from July 2022 to June 2024. It synthesises the ideas and perspectives from project participants and discusses next steps to advance the project’s objectives. Six key insights are discussed:

1. The climate-nuclear-security nexus in the Pacific: Pacific leaders identify climate change as the “single-greatest threat to the security” of their communities. Risks from rising sea levels, warming temperatures, tropical storms, and ocean acidification disproportionately affects Pacific Islanders, who rely heavily on environmental and ocean resources for their economic, social, spiritual, and cultural livelihood. These climate risks are deeply intertwined with the region’s colonial past and nuclear testing legacy, that resulted in the loss of land and habitat, environmental degradation, displacement of Indigenous communities, and long-term health effects on those exposed to radiation and the generations born to them. The Runit Dome in Enewetak Atoll, Marshall Islands, is emblematic of this interlinkage. More recently, Japan’s decision to release nuclear wastewater into the Pacific Ocean has exacerbated contemporary climate insecurities for

the region. Pacific communities advocate for simultaneous action on nuclear disarmament and climate protection, seeking accountability and compensation from the international community for the harm caused by past nuclear activities.

2. The impact of US-China rivalry on the Pacific: The United States has traditionally maintained closer ties in the Pacific region, compared to China. The region's geopolitical landscape has, however, shifted in recent years. Emerging partners like China have shown support to regional bodies and offered alternative avenues for security, development cooperation, and market access. China's expanding footprint, in turn, has prompted increased re-engagement from the United States in the Pacific. There is growing apprehension about the US-China rivalry and its implications for the overall security of their region. Some scholars fear the rivalry could once again lead to the Pacific Islands being used as a strategic playground by two nuclear-armed powers. Continued nuclear threat through geopolitical contestation and militarisation risks damaging Pacific solidarity, which is critical for channelling collective and individual resources toward climate change mitigation. Pacific nations face a dilemma in navigating these competing influences, challenging their traditional foreign policy positions. Regional discussions on the growing militarisation and security strategies of major powers are needed to understand how these might affect Pacific security and ability to respond to existential threats.

3. Understanding Pacific perspectives: The framing of Pacific narratives in contemporary security debates is often still rooted in a colonial mindset, portraying the region as helpless and in need of saving. Western dominance in academic scholarship further exacerbates this issue, perpetuating neo-colonial narratives that overlook Pacific agency and resilience. In reality, Pacific communities have proactively resisted nuclear colonialism and led disarmament and climate change efforts through initiatives like the Nuclear Free and Independent Pacific Movement and the SPNFZ. Pacific leaders and scholars seek to frame their own narratives in global security debates, highlighting the strengths and richness of the region and its peoples, and call for genuine engagement and partnership from non-Pacific countries to empower Pacific communities and ensure that their voices are heard globally.

4. Nuclear justice for the Pacific communities: For many decades, Pacific Island communities have led nuclear justice advocacy, grounded in movements centered around decolonisation and the rights of Indigenous Peoples. While there is no standard definition of nuclear justice, it primarily addresses historical injustices from nuclear testing and its ongoing repercussions. It focuses on remedying harm to victims through restorative approaches such as repatriation, resettlement, healthcare, compensation, and environmental remediation. Achieving nuclear justice requires tackling systemic issues like 'disarmament non-compliance', environmental contamination, and the marginalisation of affected communities. Some also advocate for retributive justice, emphasizing

accountability and reparations from the perpetrators, alongside cultural processes of apology and reconciliation. Ultimately, nuclear justice encompasses restorative, procedural, and retributive elements, aiming to restore dignity, recognise human rights violations, amplify victim voices, and raise global awareness about the enduring impacts of nuclear testing in the Pacific.

5. Building trust and engagement: Fostering internal and regional dialogues in the Pacific is crucial in realizing the shared vision of security, stability, and prosperity for the Blue Pacific Continent. Closer cooperation, dialogue, and engagement is needed among Pacific and Asian experts, policy practitioners, and civil society groups to future-proof the Asia-Pacific region against geopolitical challenges and to identify collaborative solutions for shared security concerns. The recent signing of an inter-Secretariat Memorandum of Understanding between ASEAN and the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) marks a promising start of collaboration; however, further operational-level collaboration is needed to build trust, understanding, and advocate for concrete actions.

6. The role of women in fighting for a nuclear-free Pacific: Women have historically been at the forefront of the Pacific's anti-nuclear campaigns, organizing public movements, demanding accountability from governments for past-nuclear harms, and raising awareness of the destructive potential of nuclear weapons. From Marshall Islands to French Polynesia and Australia, Pacific women have been instrumental in highlighting the gendered impacts of nuclear testing and campaigning for disarmament. Women's groups in the Pacific have also played significant roles in nuclear disarmament, contributing to the negotiation of treaties like the SPNFZ and the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. Through personal narratives, scholarly debates, literary activism, and artistic expression, Pacific women continue to shed light on the ongoing impacts of nuclear testing and advocate for a nuclear-free future.

To summarise, there is a critical need to deepen engagement and collaboration within the Pacific Islands while expanding dialogue across the wider Asia-Pacific region. People-to-people exchanges and Track 2 diplomatic platforms can serve as valuable mediums for coordinating like-minded actors and stakeholders across the Asia-Pacific, bypassing sometimes reluctant official government channels. Central to this effort is empowering Pacific voices, emphasizing their agency and perspectives in global security conversations. Engagement by non-Pacific states must be based on an understanding of Pacific priorities. Moving forward, a solutions-based approach must be adopted, going beyond identifying challenges to foster actionable strategies for Pacific security. Bridging the dialogue gap between Pacific Island nations and their Asian counterparts is crucial to comprehensively address shared nuclear, climate, and other security risks in the Asia-Pacific. Through sustained efforts in trust-building and dialogue, meaningful progress towards mitigating these existential threats can be achieved, promoting the security of the Pacific Islands and broader Asia-Pacific region.

Navigating Nuclear Legacies, Climate Change, and Geopolitics in the Pacific Islands

Tanvi Kulkarni and Elaine Natalie¹

Policy Fellows, Asia-Pacific Leadership Network

Introduction

Humans are altering the Earth in unprecedented ways, affecting its climate, geosphere, biosphere, and biodiversity. Recent scholarship in the geologic community has debated the beginning of the Anthropocene as the nuclear age.² The nuclear weapon, arguably, is the most powerful invention that gives the Anthropocene its human qualification – the ability to harness and weaponise the atom. The peoples of the Pacific Islands are severely impacted by the Anthropocene. From 1946 until 1996, the Pacific region was used as an atomic testing site by three nuclear weapon states,³ with over 315 nuclear tests conducted across the Pacific.⁴ Major tests were conducted in Australia, the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI), Kiribati, and Maohi Nui (French Polynesia), including atomic, hydrogen, atmospheric, and underground tests. Radioactive fallout spread across the region, carried by the ocean currents and winds, contaminating numerous islands and marine environments. Pacific Islanders and Indigenous communities have dealt with the inhumane impacts of nuclear testing on their health, environment, and livelihoods ever since. These impacts include displaced communities, radiation exposures, multi-generational diseases and health conditions, contaminated food sources, loss of biodiversity and valuable ocean resources, and water scarcity, and are compounded by other anthropogenically induced impacts of climate change, such as rising sea temperatures, droughts, and flooding.⁵

1 The authors of this report are policy fellows at the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network, and lead the project on Nuclear Disarmament and the Anthropocene: Voices from Pacific Island Countries. Our aim has been to bring together the ideas and insights collected over two years of the project, from the publications, events, and conversations with scholars from or based in the Pacific Islands and Oceania. The project has worked to include multiple and diverse perspectives from the region, and the analysis in this report draws upon those perspectives. This report should be read as a synthesis of those insights and perspectives.

2 Dylan Spaulding, “The Anthropocene as a Nuclear Age,” *The Equation*, November 2, 2023, <https://blog.ucsusa.org/dylan-spaulding/the-anthropocene-as-a-nuclear-age/#:~:text=Unlike%20the%20existential%20threat%20of,Anthropocene%20be%20our%20own%20extinction>

3 The United States, the United Kingdom, and France.

4 [Infographic] Nuclear Tests in the Pacific, Asia-Pacific Leadership Network, November 23, 2023, <https://www.apln.network/projects/voices-from-pacific-island-countries/infographic-nuclear-tests-in-the-pacific>

5 Milla Vaha, “The Pacific’s Nuclear Legacy in the Context of the Climate Crisis,” APLN, 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>: 11.

Further exacerbating concerns in the Pacific is the worsening geopolitical competition between the United States and China in the Asia-Pacific. While Washington and Beijing concentrate their considerable resources and capabilities on matters of defence and geostrategic security – through mutually hostile posturing – the Pacific Islands are calling for urgent action on climate change, the core challenge and concern faced by the region. The environmental and strategic security landscape in the Pacific is changing at an unprecedented pace, making the region an increasingly precarious and highly contested space.

Yet, even as another round of great power competition brings renewed focus to the region, Pacific Island voices remain poorly represented within wider regional and global conversations on issues that directly and indirectly affect them. There is an urgent and critical need to engage and amplify Pacific voices on threats presented by climate change, past and present nuclear weapons policies and practices, and the geopolitical competition that looms over the Pacific's most vulnerable communities.

In July 2022, the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network for Nuclear Non-proliferation and Disarmament (APLN) launched a project titled “Nuclear Disarmament and the Anthropocene: Voices from Pacific Island Countries,” with support from the Ploughshares Fund's diversity and equity initiative, Equity Rises. Initially running for one year, the project was subsequently renewed for a second year in July 2023. The project has aimed to engage and promote voices from the Pacific Islands and Indigenous Peoples of Oceania, by providing a platform to draw international attention to the injustices and inequities inherent in the Anthropocene. The project has also aimed to raise global awareness of the impact of nuclear policies and practices that directly and indirectly exacerbate existential risks for the region, including climate change, and of the shared responsibility and available tools to address human and environmental security challenges in the Pacific Islands.

This synthesis report presents a comprehensive overview of the key insights gathered during Years 1 and 2 of the project, and discusses next steps to further advance the project's objectives.

Insights from Year 1 and Year 2

With support from the Ploughshares Fund, APLN has worked to highlight the relationship between the worsening climate crisis and nuclear weapons policies and practices by engaging and elevating perspectives from the Pacific Islands. In Year 1 of the project, APLN invited experts, nuclear and climate change advocates, and youth from the Pacific Islands to share their experiences and concerns – through creative expression in art, literature, film, and poetry – on the relationship between the Anthropocene, climate crisis, the legacy of nuclear weapons testing, and contemporary nuclear policies. In Year 2 of the project, APLN highlighted

Pacific perspectives in regional and global security debates through the publication and promotion of regional-driven literature, infographics and video interviews. Perspectives and stories from the Pacific were presented at several events organised by APLN, including webinars, a special Pacific Island session at a Tenth Meeting of the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP) Study Group on Nonproliferation and Disarmament in the Asia-Pacific, and a side event at the Second Meeting of States Parties of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) in New York. Over the two years of the project, APLN also commissioned experts and scholars from the Pacific to produce analytical papers and reflective essays on a range of topics pertaining to Anthropocene injustices, nuclear legacies, climate vulnerabilities, and regional security debates. These contributions were used to identify stakeholders, key recommendations, and advocacy-relevant pathways for the Pacific.

This section presents some of the key insights from Year 1 and Year 2 of the project. These insights are drawn from the views and perspectives offered by the project participants through the above-listed project activities and outputs. Six key insights are discussed below:

1. The climate-nuclear-security nexus in the Pacific
2. The impact of US-China rivalry on the Pacific
3. Nuclear justice for the Pacific communities
4. Understanding Pacific perspectives
5. Building trust and engagement
6. The role of women in fighting for a nuclear-free Pacific

The Climate-Nuclear-Security Nexus in the Pacific

The Pacific Islands are at the frontline of the adverse impacts of the climate crisis.⁶ The *2018 Boe Declaration on Regional Security*⁷ and the *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent*, endorsed by Pacific Islands leaders, identifies climate change as the “single-greatest threat to the security” of the Pacific communities.⁸ The region’s low-lying geography and natural resources, including forests, fisheries, and coral reefs, are severely threatened by rising sea levels, warming

6 Vaha, “The Pacific’s Nuclear Legacy in the Context of the Climate Crisis.”

7 Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, “Boe Declaration on Regional Security,” Pacific Islands Forum, 2018, <https://forumsec.org/publications/boe-declaration-regional-security>

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

temperatures, tropical storms and ocean acidification. Given the high dependence of most Pacific Islanders on natural and ocean resources for their economic, social, spiritual, and cultural livelihood, these countries are especially vulnerable to the effects of global climate change.



In 2021, Tuvalu's Minister for Justice, Communication & Foreign Affairs, Simon Kofe, gave his COP26 climate summit speech while standing knee-deep in seawater to draw attention to the climate crisis impacting the low-lying Pacific island nation. Photo Credit: Tuvalu Foreign Ministry/Facebook.

For some Pacific Islanders, the climate question has been deeply intertwined with specific traumatic experiences from their colonial past and nuclear testing legacy. Nuclear testing by the United States, United Kingdom, and France, for half a century since 1946 left a devastating legacy of loss of land and habitat, environmental degradation, displacement of indigenous communities, and long-term health effects on not only those exposed to radiation but also on the generations born to them. These impacts have now been compounded by anthropogenic climate change, with the most tangible effect seen through sea level rise. In her paper, “The Pacific’s Nuclear Legacy in the Context of the Climate Crisis”, author Milla Vaha discusses the interlinkages between the two existential threats of nuclear use impacts and climate crisis for the Pacific Islands Countries and Territories (PICTs). Vaha writes that there is a direct relationship between the nuclear legacy and the threat of climate change for the Pacific Islands. Every stage of nuclear testing, from radioactive fallout to waste disposal, has contaminated the land and marine environment of the Pacific, including lagoons, atolls, reefs,

fish, and other natural resources, jeopardising food and water security, as well as the health and safety of populations living on the Islands. These permanent and irreversible damages have resulted in protracted economic losses, human and marine habitat losses, a loss of cultural heritage, and climate refugees caused by forced migration. For a region with the smallest carbon footprint in global emissions, the Pacific bears a disproportionate impact of the climate crisis.⁹

As a further consequence, these harms are impacting the ability of Pacific states to adequately respond to the impacts of climate change and manage their security. Vaha and other Pacific climate activists warn that the accelerating climate crisis will instead worsen the dangers from nuclear waste left behind in the Pacific by colonial nuclear powers. The Runit Dome in Marshall Islands, for instance, which was built by the US government in the 1970s to contain radioactive waste from atomic tests, is cited as most vulnerable to cracking and radioactive leakages from rising ocean levels, coastal erosion, and unpredictable tropical storms.¹⁰ Experts suspect that the current state of the dome is a disaster waiting to happen, affecting communities beyond Marshall Islands, and impacting marine resources that many Pacific economies are dependent on.¹¹

Contemporary climate insecurities are therefore a threat multiplier to the Pacific communities living with their nuclear legacy.¹² These are further exacerbated by the continued nuclear threat through geopolitical contestation and militarisation of the Pacific by the major global powers, and the radioactive contamination of the Pacific Ocean caused by past and present nuclear waste disposal policies and practices of contemporary nuclear powers. For example, Japan's announcement in 2021 of its intentions to release radioactive wastewater from the damaged Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant into the Pacific Ocean has heightened concerns among Pacific communities, and especially the youth, about the health and safety of their beloved Ocean.¹³ Besides the proliferation concerns around the AUKUS trilateral security partnership, Australia's acquisition of a nuclear-powered submarine fleet has also raised concerns among indigenous Australian communities and experts about the management and disposal of high-level radioactive waste and its ensuing safety, security and political implications.¹⁴

9 Laia, "The World's Carbon Sink — The Pacific Islands," Medium, March 14, 2024, https://medium.com/@laia_stem/the-worlds-carbon-sink-the-pacific-islands-cd6476efbddd

10 Vaha, "The Pacific's Nuclear Legacy in the Context of the Climate Crisis"; Bedi Racule, "See you soon, lagoon," APLN, 27 September 2022, <https://www.apln.network/projects/voices-from-pacific-island-countries/see-you-soon-lagoon-3>

11 Patrick Kaiku, "The Blue Pacific and the legacies of nuclear testing," The Strategist, 1 May 2019, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/the-blue-pacific-and-the-legacies-of-nuclear-testing/>

12 Vaha, "The Pacific's Nuclear Legacy in the Context of the Climate Crisis," 11.


13 Racule, "See you soon, lagoon."

14 Jim Green and Dimity Hawkins, "The Politics of Nuclear Waste Disposal: Lessons from Australia," APLN, January 2024, <https://cms.apln.network/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Green-Hawkins-January-2024.pdf>

The growing geopolitical contest in the region threatens Pacific solidarity which is critical for channelling collective and individual resources toward the climate mitigation agenda. Pacific leaders realise that the interests of great powers may not necessarily align with the security priorities of the Pacific Islands. Fijian Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka has frequently highlighted that the major powers seek to “polarise the Pacific into their own camps.”¹⁵ In a ministerial statement delivered in April 2024, Rabuka also pointed out to the failure of region’s “large economies” to prioritise combating climate change, biodiversity loss, and equitable resource allocation. Instead, they focus on “short-term gain and inter and intra-regional competition.” He emphasised the importance of peace and security as foundational for addressing global challenges, linking geopolitics and climate change as interconnected issues.¹⁶

According to Pacific scholars, climate security in the Pacific region cannot be meaningfully addressed without confronting the unresolved nuclear legacy issues. Many Pacific communities have therefore taken the approach of simultaneously advocating for nuclear disarmament and climate and environmental protection at regional and global forums including the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) and the United Nations. In her paper, Vaha argues that by seeking global recognition for both nuclear and climatic existential threats, the PICTs make a strong case for the accountability and compensation owed to them by the international community – especially, by the powers that intentionally chose these territories as their nuclear playground.

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¹⁵ “Fiji Prime Minister Warns against US and China Attempts to ‘Polarise’ Pacific,” The Guardian, August 25, 2023, <https://rb.gy/ylri9x>

¹⁶ Sitiveni Rabuka, “Ministerial Statement on COP28 and Climate Change,” Office of the Prime Minister Fiji, 17 April 2024, <https://www.pmooffice.gov.fj/pm-rabukas-ministerial-statement-on-cop28-and-climate-change-parliament-sitting-17th-april-2024/>

The impact of US-China rivalry on the Pacific

In recent years, the Pacific Islands have found themselves navigating the impacts of rising nuclear risks, past nuclear experimentations, and the current climate crisis amid worsening geopolitical competition and growing militarism between the major powers. The rivalry between the United States and China poses significant challenges for the Pacific Islands, which are directly affected by the economic, foreign, and defence policy decisions of these major powers. In his report titled “Nuclear Justice for the Marshall Islands in the Age of Geopolitical Rivalry in the Pacific”, Papua New Guinea-based academic Patrick Kaiku writes that the geopolitical rivalry between the United States and China has brought renewed attention to the Pacific Islands. This rivalry, however, threatens to once again become an avenue by which two nuclear-armed great powers use the Pacific Islands as a playground to pursue their own strategic goals. Kaiku reminds us that it was precisely because of the geopolitical competition between the United States and the Soviet Union that the Marshall Islands was turned into a nuclear testing ground in the 20th century.

The United States has traditionally had closer strategic and security ties in the Pacific region compared to China. The Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, Guam, and American Samoa in the South Pacific are US territories. Marshall Islands, Palau, and the Federated States of Micronesia have Compact of Free Association (COFA) arrangements with the United States, first signed in the 1980s and the 1990s, and subsequently renewed twice. This unique arrangement grants the three states access to financial and technical assistance and US domestic initiatives and services. In return, the United States gets exclusive access to the country’s land and waterways for strategic purposes.¹⁷ This arrangement has allowed the United States to become integral to the economic and strategic considerations of its Pacific partners. Moreover, with the escalating US-China competition, the strategic significance of the three COFA states to the United States has increased, leading these states to grow increasingly concerned that increasing militarisation and worsening geopolitical competition would compromise their security. In 2023, a proposal to deploy US Patriot missiles in Palau sparked debate over whether it would enhance Palau’s security or make it a target for China. Palau’s Senate rejected the deployment in December, with Palau Senate President Hokkons Baules voicing concerns that a military build-up in Palau would serve US interests rather than Palau’s own.¹⁸

17 Stewart Firth, “American Strategic Considerations Drive Compact Negotiations in Micronesia: Part 2”, In Brief, 2020/5, <https://openresearch-repository.anu.edu.au/handle/1885/202388>

18 Ongerung Kambes Kesolei, “Amid heightened tensions, Palau’s Senate rejects missile deployment,” Pacific Island Times, December 8, 2023, <https://www.pacificislandtimes.com/post/amid-heightened-tensions-palau-s-senate-rejects-missile-deployment>

The issue of nuclear reparations and compensation for past nuclear testing also remains a contentious matter between the United States and Marshall Islands under COFA. Kaiku argues that the United States' credibility as a trusted partner of the Pacific states in the context of the US-China rivalry will ultimately depend on the fulfilment of its nuclear reparation and justice commitments to the Pacific, and specifically, to the Marshall Islands.¹⁹ He urges the United States to recognise the perverse impact that nuclear weapons have had on the region and decisively pursue nuclear justice initiatives as outlined in RMI's National Nuclear Commission Strategy for Coordinated Action 2020-2023 (or the NNC Strategy), focusing on compensation, healthcare, environment, national capacity, and education while also recognising the cultural and environmental significance of the Pacific Islands to their communities.²⁰

Despite the Pacific region's long-standing ties with the United States, the region's geopolitical landscape has shifted in recent years. As the US attention dwindled in the South Pacific in the early decades of the twenty-first century,²¹ merging partners like China have shown support to regional bodies and offered alternative avenues for security, development cooperation, and market access.²² China's presence is notable through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), although concerns about debt risks have emerged in some Pacific countries. Despite a decrease in official development financing since 2016, China maintains support in certain countries such as the Solomon Islands and Kiribati, where it has recently strengthened diplomatic ties and signed security agreements. China's expanding footprint in the South Pacific, in turn, has prompted increased re-engagement from the United States with the region. In 2022 and 2023, the United States hosted Pacific Island leaders at the White House, pledging significant funding for climate change initiatives. It also signed strategic agreements like the Defense Cooperation Agreement with Papua New Guinea.²³

19 Patrick Kaiku, "Nuclear Justice for the Marshall Islands in the Age of Geopolitical Rivalry in the Pacific," APLN, August 2023, https://cms.apln.network/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Patrick-Kaiku_August-2023.pdf

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

21 "Navy official admits US 'neglected' South Pacific as Five Eyes intelligence alliance secretly meets in New Zealand," South China Morning Post, September 14, 2022, <https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/australasia/article/3192443/navy-official-admits-us-neglected-south-pacific-five-eyes>

22 Sandra Tarte, "Advancing Regional Stability in an Era of Geopolitical Competition and Tension: The Role of Fiji," APLN, April 2024, https://cms.apln.network/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Fiji-Paper_Sandra-Tarte_V4.pdf

23 Moses Sakai, "Can the Pacific Islands remain 'friends to all' amid US-China competition?" Pacific Forum, 11 January 2024, <https://pacforum.org/publications/pacnet-2-can-the-pacific-islands-remain-friends-to-all-amid-us-china-competition/>



Map of the Pacific Region. Courtesy: iStock/PeterHermesFurian.

There is growing apprehension among the Pacific Island Countries, discernible in their political communiques,²⁴ about the intensifying geopolitical competition and its implications for the overall security of their region. What brings greater discomfort about the renewed geopolitical tensions in the region is the dilemma that now confronts the Pacific countries in terms of choosing sides. This directly conflicts with foreign policy positions such as ‘friends to all, enemies to none,’ a form of ‘soft’ non-alignment that resists being confined to spheres of influence while not precluding the signing of defence pacts with either side.²⁵ The region’s solidarity and political dynamics, notably the power relations between the Micronesian, Melanesian, and Polynesian bloc of countries, also stand to be affected by the pulls and pressures of the US-China rivalry, especially decisions regarding forging closer ties with Washington and Beijing. More recently, the announcement of the AUKUS pact in September 2022 was received very negatively in many parts of the Pacific, not only vis-a-vis the United States but also with regard to Australia’s role as a strategic partner of the US in the Pacific. Together with nuclear proliferation and waste management concerns, Pacific

24 Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, “2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent.”

25 Sandra Tarte, “Advancing Regional Stability in an Era of Geopolitical Competition and Tension: The Role of Fiji,” Asia-Pacific Leadership Network, April 2024, https://cms.apln.network/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Fiji-Paper_Sandra-Tarte_V4.pdf

leaders fear that AUKUS breaks the consensus on keeping the South Pacific region nuclear-free, therefore threatening the future of the Rarotonga Treaty that establishes the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone (SPNFZ).²⁶ Australia, a state party to the Rarotonga Treaty, is seen to be backsliding on these commitments through the AUKUS security pact.

Pacific scholars suggest that going forward, PICTs need to have regional conversations on the ongoing militarisation of the region and the military strategies of major powers (including the US, its various allies and partners, and China) and how these might affect their overall security, including their ability to respond to existential threats, like biodiversity depletion and food shortages, and conflict escalation in the near future.

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Understanding Pacific perspectives

Even as great power competition and the worsening climate crisis bring renewed focus to the Pacific region, Pacific Island voices remain poorly represented within wider regional and global conversations on issues that directly and indirectly affect them. Moreover, Pacific perspectives are often presented as narratives of the vulnerable and the weak, undermining their agency and devaluing their contribution to international security debates. Scholars like Maima Koro, Tarcisius Kabutaulaka, and Patrick Kaiku argue that just like the decision behind choosing the Pacific as locations for nuclear tests and then drawing arbitrary boundaries in this region, the framing of Pacific narratives in contemporary security debates is also rooted in the colonial mindset.²⁷ Koro observes that major powers continue

26 Vijay Naidu, “Strengthening a Nuclear-Free Pacific Region,” APLN, June 2024, <https://www.apln.network/projects/voices-from-pacific-island-countries/strengthening-a-nuclear-free-pacific-region>

27 Maima Koro, “Relational Security: Ethical Dilemmas of Geopolitics in the Blue Pacific Continent,” APLN, August 2023, <https://cms.apln.network/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Maima-Koro-August-2023.pdf>; Bedi Racule, Maima Koro, Dimity Hawkins, and Tarcisius Kabutaulaka, “Strengthening a Nuclear-Free Pacific Region” Second Meeting of States Parties to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW2MSP), November 28, 2023, New York <https://www.apln.network/events/past/strengthening-a-nuclear-free-pacific-region>; Kaiku, “Nuclear Justice for the Marshall Islands in the Age of Geopolitical Rivalry in the Pacific.”

to approach the Pacific Islands as a collection of isolated states.²⁸ In their pursuit of strategic influence in the Pacific region, major powers such as the United States and China wilfully ignore and fail to register Pacific peoples' interests as important, even when Pacific views are expressed and communicated to them.

Mainstream global academic scholarship on nuclear disarmament, non-proliferation, and prohibition has been dominated by Western researchers. As a result, the Pacific Island countries and communities tend to be framed in global and regional discourses through neo-colonial Western hegemonic narratives, which portray this region as helpless and vulnerable, and in need of being saved and protected by others.²⁹ The National Nuclear Commission of Marshall Islands has further highlighted how this research space and the representation of the Pacific's nuclear legacy in international discourses have historically been exploitative rather than empowering for Pacific Islanders.³⁰ The Commission notes that:

*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.*³¹

There is also a sense of fatigue and disappointment among nuclear test survivors and their families that their testimonies are not being effectively channelled to bring any meaningful results or redress to their communities. In her essay titled "Keeping Nuclear Memories Alive," Brooke Takala recalls a conversation she had with a Rongelap elder about the impact of sharing testimonies. The elder expressed uncertainty about others' intentions when using her testimony and emphasised that "nuclear was only a part of her story."³² Takala notes the

28 Koro, "Relational Security: Ethical Dilemmas of Geopolitics in the Blue Pacific Continent."

29 Manon Leprince, "Shifting Security Narratives in Oceania: Pacific Island Countries and the "New Pacific Diplomacy," *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, December 7, 2022, Air University Press, p. 122, <https://media.defense.gov/2022/Dec/06/2003126611/-1/-1/1/JIPA%20November-December%202022.PDF>

30 Kaiku, "Nuclear Justice for the Marshall Islands in the Age of Geopolitical Rivalry in the Pacific."


31 National Nuclear Commission, The Republic of the Marshall Islands, "Ethics Protocol for Researchers and Study Abroad Instructors," Republic of the Marshall Islands Environmental Data Portal, 2021, <https://rmi-data.sprep.org/resource/nuclear-research-protocol-english-version>

32 Brooke Takala, "Keeping Nuclear Memories Alive," APLN, February 2024, <https://cms.apln.network/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Takala-February-2024.pdf>

significance of survivor testimonies in global disarmament efforts but cautions against reducing a person's life to a single narrative.

Pacific communities have not been passive victims of nuclear testing and colonialism. They proactively protested the nuclear colonialism of the major powers and, as Vaha notes, have “actively resisted victimisation and taken leadership in both nuclear disarmament and climate change spaces.”³³ She further observes that, “As a consequence of its dark nuclear legacy, the Pacific region has perhaps become the most prominent anti-nuclear region in the world. This resistance to nuclear weapons not only responds to colonial exploitation, but also changes the narrative towards one of regional solidarity and empowerment.”³⁴ Pacific communities have carried their resistance and protest in many forms, including politically, legally and artistically, to bring justice to their struggles.³⁵ Some of the most notable Pacific initiatives and efforts include the Nuclear Free and Independent Pacific Movement (NFIP), the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone (SPNFZ), also known as the Treaty of Rarotonga (1985), the RMI collective of ERUB (Enewetak, Rongelap, Utrik, and Bikini), and innumerable resistance movements led by women, youth, and various Pacific communities. Takala observes that prevailing nuclear activism and advocacy agendas conveniently discount how Pacific Islanders have “led global disarmament efforts through the lens of decolonisation” and laid the foundation for disarmament policy.³⁶ Takala emphasises that while decolonisation has always been at the core of the anti-nuclear movement in the Pacific, the roots of the movement are being erased as the global disarmament regime becomes increasingly centred in the West.³⁷

Pacific leaders and scholars seek to frame their own narratives in global security debates and discourse, highlighting the strengths and richness of the Pacific and its peoples, including their knowledge cultures, practices, values and beliefs that help in countering the Anthropocene.



33 Vaha, “The Pacific’s Nuclear Legacy in the Context of the Climate Crisis,” 15.

34 Ibid.

35 Sylvia C Frain and Fiona Amundsen, “Seeing the Sun: Nuclear (In)visibility in the Mariana Islands of Guam and Tinian,” APLN, December 2023, <https://www.apln.network/projects/voices-from-pacific-island-countries/seeing-the-sun-nuclear-invisibility-in-the-mariana-islands-of-guam-tinian>

36 Takala, “Keeping Nuclear Memories Alive.”

37 Ibid.

Pacific leaders and scholars seek to frame their own narratives in global security debates and discourse, highlighting the strengths and richness of the Pacific and its peoples, including their knowledge cultures, practices, values and beliefs that help in countering the Anthropocene. In her paper titled “Relational Security: Ethical Dilemmas of Geopolitics in the Blue Pacific Continent,” Maima Koro suggests, in keeping with the intellectual tradition of Epeli Hau’ofa, that in order to shift narratives, it is more pertinent to think of the Pacific Islands as a region that, while extremely diverse and small in combined landmass, is deeply interconnected by the Pacific ocean³⁸ - hence the moniker ‘Blue Pacific Continent’. According to Kabutaulaka, the Blue Pacific idea as a foundation for collective regional identity and cooperation is a counternarrative to traditional conceptions of Pacific regionalism and a strategy to counter the dominance of global powers in the region.³⁹ Pacific countries must have their own conversations on how “to implement their vision of a Blue Pacific Continent that is ‘secure, stable, and prosperous.’”⁴⁰ Koro also recommends that non-Pacific countries should deepen their understanding of and relationships with Pacific communities to help build the region through collaborative empowerment and consultation as equal partners before making decisions that impacts Pacific countries and their communities. Instead of asking Pacific countries to make binary geopolitical decisions, they should acknowledge Pacific Leaders’ priorities by supporting security and stability of the region.

Nuclear Justice as understood by Pacific communities

Calls for nuclear justice are being raised with increasing urgency in contemporary global nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation conversations. The concept has evolved to have many different meanings and interpretations for communities affected by nuclear weapons.⁴¹ Within the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), the principles of justice and fairness were to be accommodated through the “bargain” between the nuclear weapon states (non-proliferation and disarmament) and the non-nuclear weapon states (access to peaceful nuclear uses and non-acquisition of nuclear weapons). That bargain, particularly the progress on disarmament obligations as outlined in Article 6 of the NPT, remains unfulfilled. For PICTs, nuclear justice has historically meant addressing the past use and testing of nuclear weapons in ways that do justice both to the victims of these tests and to the states that were responsible for

38 Koro, “Relational Security: Ethical Dilemmas of Geopolitics in the Blue Pacific Continent.”

39 Tarcisius Kabutaulaka, “Mapping the Blue Pacific in a Changing Regional Order,” chapter in *The China Alternative: Changing Regional Order in the Pacific Islands*, ed. Graeme Smith and Terence Wesley-Smith (Canberra: ANU Press, 2021), 41–69, <https://press-files.anu.edu.au/downloads/press/n7754/pdf/ch01.pdf>

40 Koro, “Relational Security: Ethical Dilemmas of Geopolitics in the Blue Pacific Continent.”

41 APLN, “What is Nuclear Justice?” APLN, 28 February 2024, <https://www.apln.network/projects/voices-from-pacific-island-countries/infographic-what-is-nuclear-justice>

conducting them (the perpetrators). The entry into force of the TPNW has been instrumental in shedding much-needed light on nuclear justice as the responsibility of the international community in realising and providing victim assistance and environmental remediation to all those affected by past nuclear tests and uses. PICTs have led nuclear justice advocacy for many decades, grounded in Pacific movements centred around decolonisation and the rights of Indigenous peoples, as Takala reminds us.⁴² At the core of these Pacific discourses on justice is the process of making visible Indigenous communities, who have been living among the permanent fallout of nuclear tests and who have been rendered invisible within settler state narratives and archives.⁴³

There is no standard definition of nuclear justice, nor a singular approach to realising it. It is a broad concept that accommodates varied meanings depending on what kind of injustice is experienced and to whom it is directed toward. The most straightforward understanding centres those that have been harmed. It asks, how can we remedy harms to the victims?⁴⁴ This kind of nuclear justice is called restorative, reparative, or corrective justice. Restorative nuclear justice can be delivered through repatriation and resettlement of displaced communities to decontaminated, safe, and healthy homelands, provision and fair access to quality health care, especially cancer care and mental health care, and the formulation of a just and fair victim compensation and livelihood systems, including pensions and insurance programs.⁴⁵ Addressing the humanitarian and environmental consequences of nuclear weapons are the pathways to attaining restorative nuclear justice. Articles 6 and 7 of the TPNW provide scope for international collaboration towards these pathways. Experts appeal, however, that a victim assistance and environment regime for nuclear justice must be not only inclusive and accessible to all but also developed in consultation with the affected communities.⁴⁶ Another concern was voiced by Marshall Islands President Hilda Heine when she explained that while her country supports the Treaty's goals, language suggesting state party responsibility for cleaning up nuclear damage makes it difficult to sign or ratify. As the United States is responsible for nuclear testing in the Marshall Islands but not a party to the Treaty, Heine contended

42 Takala, "Keeping Nuclear Memories Alive."

43 Sylvia C. Frain and Fiona Amundsen, "Seeing the Sun: Nuclear (in)visibility in the Mariana Islands of Guam & Tinian," APLN, December 2023, <https://cms.apln.network/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Frain-Amundsen-December-2023.pdf>

44 Maima Koro, Patrick Kaiku, and Milla Vaha, "Understanding Nuclear Justice for the Pacific: Expert Insights," APLN, 7 September 2023, <https://www.apln.network/projects/voices-from-pacific-island-countries/understanding-nuclear-justice-for-the-pacific-expert-insights>

45 APLN, "What is Nuclear Justice?"

46 Becky Alexis-Martin, Qurat UI Ain, Kolby Kaller, Ben Donaldson and Matthew Maslen, "Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons: Victim Assistance and Environmental Remediation in the Pacific," APLN, May 2024, <https://cms.apln.network/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Becky-Alexis-Martin-Qurat-UI-Ain-Victim-Assistance-and-Environmental-Remediation.pdf>

that RMI ratification would unfairly burden her country with cleaning up nuclear contamination.⁴⁷

In the paper titled “Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons: Victim Assistance and Environmental Remediation in the Pacific”, nuclear justice advocates Becky Alexis-Martin, Qurat Ul Ain, Kolby Kaller, Ben Donaldson and Matthew Maslen point out that remediation efforts remain inaccessible to certain communities like those in French Polynesia. Because foreign affairs powers still reside with mainland France, French Polynesia, as an overseas territory of France, is limited in its capacity to seek redress from international initiatives for outstanding nuclear justice claims.⁴⁸ They define access as not just the availability of support and aid, but also the availability of credible data on the health and environmental impacts of radiation in non-colonial languages. They refer to nuclear justice as also epistemic justice that involves building and supporting local capacities to produce relevant research on the health and environmental impacts of radiation in non-colonial languages. Nuclear justice can also be advanced through the creation of an Environmental Remediation and Victim Assistance Trust Fund, mandated by Articles 6 and 7 of the TPNW.⁴⁹

Restorative nuclear justice also ensures freedom from potential nuclear threats, that is, through: negative security assurances and non-use of nuclear threats by nuclear weapon powers; reduced risks of nuclear accidents and incidents by miscalculations; commitments to abolish nuclear use and threats of use; and codifying non-proliferation, disarmament and nuclear waste disposal commitments through international legally binding treaties.⁵⁰ Nuclear justice ultimately lies in nuclear-armed states addressing the issue of ‘disarmament non-compliance’ and realising that disarmament is deeply connected to climate change, racial justice, public health, and economic security.

Some look at nuclear justice as retributive justice that is aimed towards the perpetrator. This justice is about accountability and genuine remorse.⁵¹ It starts with admitting and owning the multitude of harm (economic, cultural, public health, psychological, and intergenerational) that Pacific people and their communities have suffered due to nuclear testing and radiation exposure, and setting obligations for perpetrators to repair those harms.⁵² Retributive nuclear

47 Nic Maclellan, “Will Marshall Islands sign the TPNW nuclear ban treaty?” Islands Business, 6 March 2024, <https://islandsbusiness.com/news-break/will-marshall-islands-sign-the-tpnw-nuclear-ban-treaty/>

48 Ibid.

49 Ibid.

50 APLN, “What is Nuclear Justice?”

51 Koro, Kaiku, and Vaha, “Understanding Nuclear Justice for the Pacific: Expert Insights.”

52 APLN, “What is Nuclear Justice?”

justice can happen any number of ways, through reparations, compensation, national and international legislations, and the creation of Nuclear Claims Tribunals for settling claims, such as the Marshall Islands Nuclear Claims Tribunal. The perpetrators of nuclear tests are also expected to issue a public apology to the affected communities. In the case of Pacific Island communities, apology and reconciliation resonate with cultural processes of healing and building trust, processes that have been used in post-conflict situations in places like Bougainville and the Solomon Islands.⁵³

Nuclear justice also involves the opportunity for affected communities to reclaim and restore their dignity⁵⁴ and identity as proud and self-respecting peoples.⁵⁵ Such procedural justice emphasises that any future actions to address nuclear harms and injustices consider all affected stakeholders, by making systematic changes to ensure that these harms are never perpetrated again. It is for the international community to recognise that harms inflicted by threat or use of nuclear weapons or tests is a violation of fundamental human rights, to amplify the voices and demands of victims and survivors of nuclear weapons use and tests, to ensure their fair representations in the nuclear policy space, and to invest in the success and fairness of compensation systems for nuclear victims and survivors. The realisation of nuclear justice also requires raising global awareness about the history of nuclear testing in the Pacific. This awareness can be created through the generation of credible information and knowledge about the humanitarian impacts of nuclear weapons use.

Building Trust and Engagement

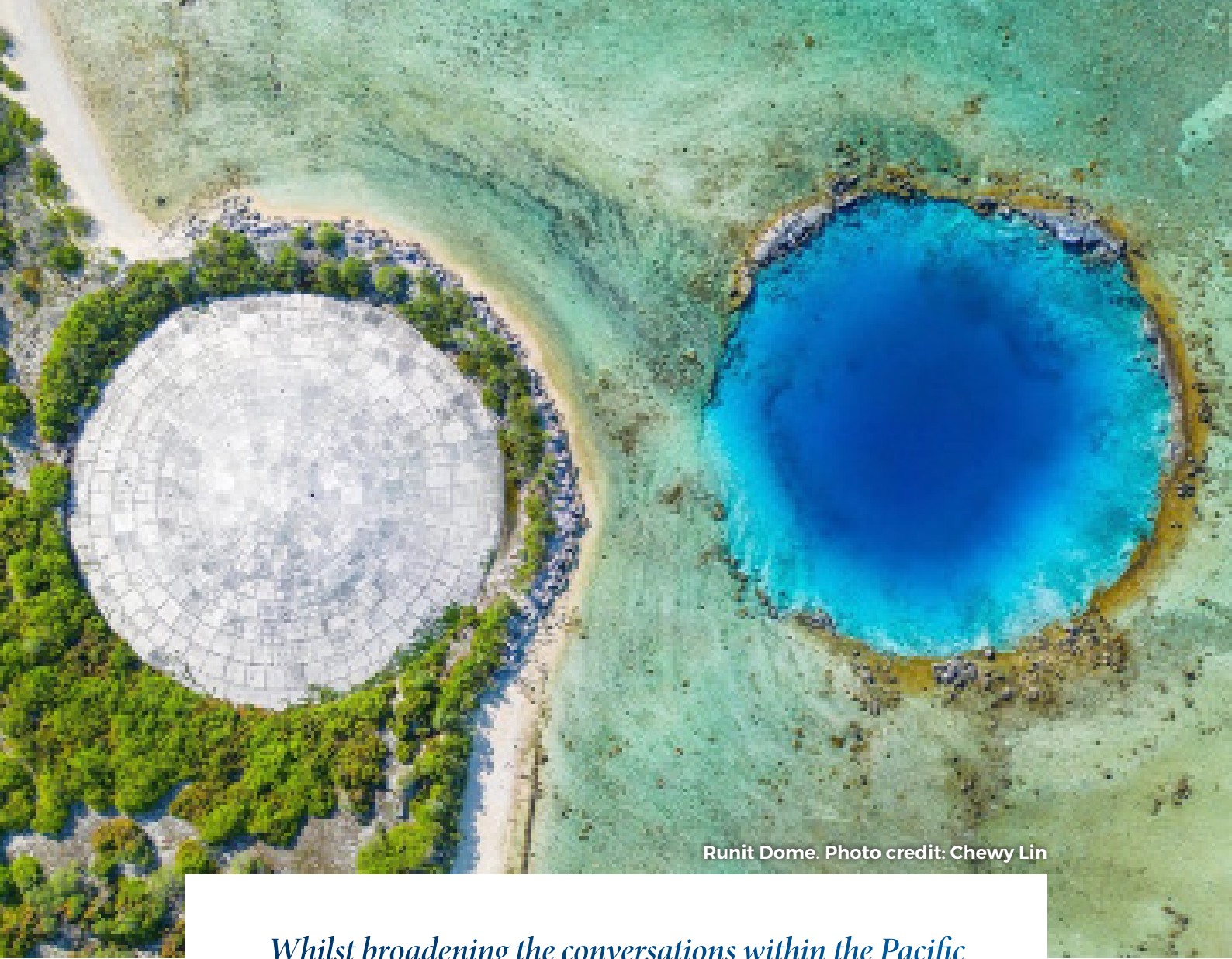
As Koro points out, it is important to create opportunities for Pacific nations to engage in internal dialogues with their people and regionally with their leaders to realise their shared vision of a Blue Pacific Continent characterised by security, stability, and prosperity.⁵⁶ This includes promoting conversations on issues such as the climate-nuclear-security nexus, nuclear justice, and escalating geopolitical tensions within the Pacific region. These conversations need to involve not only experts but also the general public and various communities. At a time when nuclear armed powers and their allies are vying for geopolitical influence in the Pacific, it is especially important for Pacific peoples to be well-informed. Scholarly papers and contributions from Pasifika experts originally intended for

53 Barbera Lawler, "Asia Pacific: Heal History – Build Peace, Trust And Hope For The Future (Could Pancasila Be Applied Regionally?)," *AL-WIJDÂN: Journal of Islamic Education Studies*, Volume 8 (1), January 2023.

54 Koro, Kaiku, and Vaha, "Understanding Nuclear Justice for the Pacific: Expert Insights."

55 Kaiku, "Nuclear Justice for the Marshall Islands in the Age of Geopolitical Rivalry in the Pacific."

56 Koro, "Relational Security: Ethical Dilemmas of Geopolitics in the Blue Pacific Continent."



Runit Dome. Photo credit: Chewy Lin

Whilst broadening the conversations within the Pacific region, there is also a need to expand the dialogue with counterparts in Asia, exploring collaborative approaches to safeguard the wider Asia-Pacific region from rising nuclear and climate risks and threats posed by the escalating geopolitical competition and growing militarisation in the region.

academic or policy audiences should be simplified into more accessible formats. These simplified materials can then be shared through established regional organisations such as the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, Secretariat of the Pacific Community, University of the South Pacific, and Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Program, as well as grassroots networks. As noted by Kaiku, there is a pressing need to involve and engage the entire Pacific Islands region in the struggle for nuclear justice.⁵⁷ By framing nuclear justice as a regional issue, more partners and states within the Pacific can lend weight to the cause. For instance, highlighting the threat of nuclear waste and ocean pollution stemming from past testing in the Marshall Islands resonates with broader Pacific concerns. Marshall Islands, Maohi Nui (French Polynesia), and Kiribati must garner support from regional institutions and like-minded states, as they “cannot fight a lonely battle against a global hegemon.”⁵⁸ Creative messaging and diplomatic strategies are essential to rally support from neighbouring states and maximise diplomatic impact.

In conversations with Pacific experts, broadening the dialogue to include counterparts in Asia was also suggested. The aim is to explore strategies to future-proof the Asia-Pacific region against threats posed by the US-China geopolitical competition, increasing militarisation, and other shared security concerns. This would involve fostering closer cooperation and engagement among Pacific and Asian experts, policy practitioners, and civil society groups to explore collaborative solutions and identify opportunities to address worsening nuclear and climate risks, as well as the consequences of great power competition. The lack of Pacific representation in regional and international security forums not only results in overlooked Pacific perspectives, but also deprives Pacific experts of opportunities to directly engage with and learn about the broader Asia-Pacific region and its various security concerns. During the signing of an inter-Secretariat Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between ASEAN and the PIF in September 2023, Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi emphasised the importance of cooperation between ASEAN and countries in the Indian and Pacific Oceans. She highlighted the interconnectedness of the Asia-Pacific, noting that “what happens in the region will likely affect us all.” Marsudi stressed the need to work together to maintain peace, stability, and prosperity in the region, and to strengthen cooperation across various areas of common interest including climate change and maritime issues. The MoU was signed by Deputy Secretary-General of the PIFS, Esala Nayasi, and witnessed by the Foreign Minister of the Cook Islands as Chair of the PIF. This marks a promising start of collaboration between the Pacific and Asia; however, further collaboration at the working/operational level among experts, policy practitioners, and civil society groups

57 Kaiku, “Nuclear Justice for the Marshall Islands in the Age of Geopolitical Rivalry in the Pacific.”

58 Ibid.

will be necessary to foster trust and understanding, and to advocate for concrete actions.⁵⁹

The Role of Women in fighting for a nuclear-free Pacific

Women have historically been at the forefront of the Pacific's anti-nuclear campaigns and have played a leading role in organising nuclear-free and independent movements, demanding accountability from governments for past-nuclear harms and the raising awareness of the destructive potential of nuclear weapons. Across the Pacific Islands, in countries not limited to those used for nuclear tests, many Pacific women contributed to highlighting the gendered impacts and harms of nuclear explosions devised by foreign powers through their nuclear testing programs and campaigned to abolish nuclear weapons. Despite their rich contributions, the role of Pasifika women in regional and global anti-nuclear resistance remains overlooked and understudied in mainstream disarmament discourses, as Nicole George comments in her essay titled "Making the 'Invisible' Visible: Women and the Anti-Nuclear Resistance in the Pacific Islands."⁶⁰

Pasifika women have led efforts to keep the Pacific nuclear-free, through advocacy, scholarship, public protests, political interventions, and organised movements. Marshallese activists Darlene Keju and Lijon Eknilang presented evidence of environmental contamination and resulting ill-health, making the dangers of nuclear testing visible to a global audience.⁶¹ In French Polynesia, French settler and anthropologist Marie Thérèse Danielsson, published key reports on the multifaceted impacts of nuclear testing.⁶² In Fiji, Amelia Rokotuivuna, Meraia Taufa Vakatale, and Suliana Siwatibau from the Young Women's Christian Association,⁶³ and Elicita 'Cita' Morei in Palau are notable figures who have led feminist campaigns for spreading awareness about harms from nuclear tests. In Australia, Karina Lester, a Yankunytjatjara Anangu woman from the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands (APY Lands) and a council of senior Aboriginal women called the Kupa Piti Kungka Tjuta, in Southern Australia have persistently

59 Ministry of Foreign Affairs Indonesia, "ASEAN Strengthens Cooperation with IORA and PIC," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, 4 September 2023, <https://kemlu.go.id/portal/en/read/5169/berita/asean-strengthens-cooperation-with-iora-and-pic>

60 Nicole George, "Making the 'Invisible' Visible: Women and the Anti-Nuclear Resistance in the Pacific Islands," APLN, March 2024, https://cms.apln.network/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/George_Making-the-Invisible-Visible-Women-and-the-Anti-Nuclear-Resistance-in-the-Pacific-Islands.pdf

61 Ibid.

62 Ibid.

63 Ibid.

fought for the restoration of the Maralinga and Emu Field sites.⁶⁴ Pacific women's groups have been instrumental in driving regional and international movements for nuclear disarmament, such as the Nuclear Free and Independent Pacific (NFIP) movement in the negotiation of the SPNWFZ and the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) efforts for the negotiation of the TPNW.



Darlene Keju in a 1995 photo leads Youth to Youth in Health members in a lively song as part of a community health outreach program in Majuro. Photo: Giff Johnson.

Pacific women have contributed equally fiercely to scholarly debates on nuclear weapons and global politics through their academic writings and literary activism.⁶⁵ The names of Teresia Teaiwa, Jully Makini, Vanessa Griffen, and Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner resonate with many Pacific Islanders today for their activism through literary and poetic reflections on the nuclearisation in the Pacific. Through their writings, these women scholars have depicted not just the gendered harms of nuclear weapons but also the gender-specific violence afflicted by growing militarisation in the Pacific Islands. A new generation of young Pasifika women have depicted the inter-generational horror and destruction of nuclear testing

64 Green and Hawkins, "The Politics of Nuclear Waste Disposal: Lessons from Australia."

65 "Making the "Invisible" Visible: Women and the Anti-Nuclear Resistance in the Pacific Islands."

and highlighted the inequities and injustice of channelling resources into weapons that only exacerbate existential risks, including climate change (see Appendix).

To a large extent, women's participation in the anti-nuclear movements comes from personal loss and suffering. Pacific women have suffered health, reproductive, environmental, economic, social, and political impacts of nuclear colonisation with direct and intergenerational consequences for their children and families. Koro narrates a personal story of trauma that her mother, Tanetau, has carried in her own name, which means war tank in Samoan. Koro says, "I personally relate to feelings of anxiety regarding potential violent conflict in the Pacific, as a result of geopolitical posturing." Luisa Tuilau's powerful video titled "All the Way From Down Here" tells the story of Brooke Takala and her two boys from the Marshall Islands, as they share the ongoing, tangible impacts of nuclear weapons testing which they continue to endure.⁶⁶ In her poem "See you soon, Lagoon," Bedi Racule depicts a woman's traumatic separation from her childhood lagoon, juxtaposing it with the devastating impacts of nuclear weapons, including diseases, infertility, loss of loved ones and the loss of connection between people and environment.⁶⁷

Conclusions and Next Steps

There is need and scope to build on this foundational work to deepen engagement and collaboration with Pacific Island experts and scholars, civil society groups, and non-governmental organisations, and continue to raise awareness of the impact of nuclear and climate risks in the Pacific. Whilst broadening the conversations within the Pacific region, there is also a need to expand the dialogue with counterparts in Asia, exploring collaborative approaches to safeguard the wider Asia-Pacific region from rising nuclear and climate risks and threats posed by the escalating geopolitical competition and growing militarisation in the region.

Increased empowerment of Pacific voices: Pacific leaders and scholars do not want their countries to be considered as hapless victims, neither of the nuclear colonialism of the past nor of the great power competition of the present. Pacific leaders reject the dilemma framed in dominant security narratives which presents

⁶⁶ Luisa Tuilau, "All the Way from Down Here," APLN, 20 July 2023, <https://www.apln.network/projects/voices-from-pacific-island-countries/all-the-way-from-down-here>

⁶⁷ Racule, "See you soon, lagoon."

the Pacific with a choice between United States and China.⁶⁸ Instead, they want Pacific perspectives to matter in their own right, in the global security and power discourses, and intellectual and policy debates. Pacific leaders aim to promote their agency, influence, and framing of security in the Pacific region. This agency is asserted most effectively, according to the PIF leadership, through the Blue Pacific narrative and the ‘new Pacific’ diplomacy.⁶⁹ For some of the under-resourced Pacific Small Island Developing States (PSIDS) it is particularly useful to be represented as the Pacific collective through the PIF and the Blue Pacific identity.

Pacific experts urge that non-Pacific actors attempting to build meaningful relationships with and empower Pacific voices should also make efforts to understand the autonomous agency of Pacific peoples. This requires them to reframe security discussions using words and language in policy statements and media commentaries that do not box Pacific narratives into binary geopolitical choices.⁷⁰ Binary worldviews tend to limit cooperation on matters affecting everyone. It is important to understand that the Pacific leaders’ “friend to all, enemy to none” approach is in pursuit of their own security and survival.⁷¹ For most Pacific experts, empowerment continues to be embedded in a decolonising lens of research and advocacy, and not simply tokenising Pacific testimonies and imaginings of a peaceful Pacific.⁷²

A solutions-based approach: There is a need to move beyond simply identifying problems and challenges toward cultivating a solutions-based approach while addressing climate and nuclear risks in a worsening geopolitical environment. The PIF’s 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent also calls for “urgent, immediate and appropriate action” against most significant threats, including climate change, to the Pacific region. This means that existing studies, research,

68 Meg Taylor, “Keynote Address. The China Alternative: Changing Regional Order in the Pacific Island” (speech, University of the South Pacific, Port Vila, Vanuatu, 8 February 2019), <https://forumsec.org/publications/keynote-address-dame-meg-taylor-secretary-general-china-alternative-changing-regional>

69 The ‘new Pacific’ diplomacy is the diplomacy followed by Pacific Island Countries centred on leveraging Pacific voices in global affairs, establishing greater Pacific control of the regional agenda and diplomatic processes, building a new array of Pacific-controlled institutions, and fostering wider political engagement within and outside the Pacific. The new Pacific diplomacy was prompted by Fiji in 2009, after its suspension from the PIF, but has since received wider support in the region. The new Pacific diplomacy is also a response to the failures of existing regional institutions to address issues such as climate change. For instance, the interests of stronger states like Australia and New Zealand have known to prevail over smaller islands’ interests, notably on climate diplomacy regarding carbon emissions targets. See: Grey Fry and Sandra Tarte, “The ‘New Pacific Diplomacy’: An Introduction,” in *The New Pacific Diplomacy*, ed. Greg Fry and Sandra Tarte (Canberra: ANU Press, 2015), 3–20; and Manon Leprince, “Shifting Security Narratives in Oceania: Pacific Island Countries and the ‘New Pacific Diplomacy,’” 121–22.

70 Koro, “Relational Security: Ethical Dilemmas of Geopolitics in the Blue Pacific Continent.”

71 Ibid.

72 Takala, “Keeping Nuclear Memories Alive.”

and information from grassroots communities in the Pacific Islands must be leveraged to create greater regional and global awareness. It also means upholding existing mechanisms such as the South Pacific Nuclear-Free Zone. Experts suggest that more regional conversations are needed within the Pacific on actionable ways to future-proof the region against existing and emerging threats. These conversations should evolve into discussions on realistic long-term solutions based on the principles of best practice and safeguarding the humanitarian rights of indigenous communities. The Runit Dome, for instance, requires the most urgent attention and assistance, not only from the RMI and the United States but also from the wider international community, to pre-empt a looming environmental disaster from the dome's collapse.

Pacific Islanders have a proven track record of working on a regional scale across island communities to address concerns such as nuclear testing in the Pacific.⁷³ These examples of regional collaborations should be revisited. The Nuclear Free and Independent Pacific movement of the 1980s is a prime example of a grassroots movement that emerged from growing regional consciousness on the effects of and resistance to nuclear testing in the Pacific. The challenge today is to regenerate that collective regional understanding of the convergence of threats to the survival of Pacific Islanders. By emphasising the nuclear legacy of the Pacific as a regional and global issue, there can be increased buy-in and a sense of ownership of the issue by sovereign states in the Pacific.

Expanding the dialogue: Pacific experts find that PICT perspectives have traditionally been dismissed as fringe perspectives and excluded from policy discussions in Asia-Pacific. It is only recently, with the growing Chinese influence in the Pacific region, that the West is refocusing its strategic attention on security alliances and partnerships with PICTs. There is currently little dialogue between the Asian countries and the PICTs on emerging security challenges in the Asia-Pacific, a wider region that is connected by the Indian and Pacific oceans. This lack of interaction prevents nations confronting similar nuclear and climate-related existential threats from understanding each other's risk perceptions and ways to mitigate them. Closer engagement is therefore also needed between leaders, policy practitioners, experts, and civil society members from Asia and the Pacific to understand how security perceptions and strategic developments in both regions affect the geopolitical landscape of the wider Asia-Pacific region. Such engagement could also offer opportunities to identify collaborative solutions to address shared challenges. Building trust and fostering relationships with the peoples of the Pacific, while also reinforcing regional and international awareness of the threats and challenges to them, is a gradual process that takes a significant investment of time and sustained effort from all sides. There are unresolved

73 Nic Maclellan, "Introduction: Resistance and Survival – The Nuclear Era in the Pacific," *The Journal of Pacific History*, 7 January 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00223344.2023.2276994>

nuclear legacy issues which are causing tensions between Pacific Island Countries and other nuclear countries. Platforms and forums must be created within the Asia-Pacific where dialogue can take place to address these tensions.

Closer engagement is therefore also needed between leaders, policy practitioners, experts, and civil society members from Asia and the Pacific to understand how security perceptions and strategic developments in both regions affect the geopolitical landscape of the wider Asia-Pacific region. Such engagement could also offer opportunities to identify collaborative solutions to address shared challenges.

There is a critical need to deepen engagement and collaboration within the Pacific Islands while expanding dialogue across the wider Asia-Pacific region. People-to-people exchanges and Track 2 diplomatic platforms can serve as valuable mediums for coordinating like-minded actors and stakeholders across the Asia-Pacific, bypassing sometimes reluctant official government channels of interactions. Central to this effort is the empowerment of Pacific voices, emphasising their agency and perspectives in global conversations on security. This also means that engagement of non-Pacific states with the Pacific must be based on an understanding of the priorities of the Pacific. Moving forward, a solutions-based approach must be adopted while addressing security across the Pacific region, going beyond the mere identification of challenges to fostering actionable strategies. Moreover, bridging the dialogue gap between Pacific Island nations and their Asian counterparts is crucial to comprehensively address shared nuclear, climate, and other security risks in the Asia-Pacific. Through sustained efforts in trust-building and dialogue, meaningful progress towards mitigating these existential threats can be achieved, promoting the security of the Pacific Islands and broader Asia-Pacific region.

Appendix

Summary of Year 1 and Year 2 Activities

Year 1 of this project began in July 2022 with a Pacific Islands Creative Competition (PICC) centered around the theme of “Nuclear Weapons and the Climate Crisis.” The competition aimed to provide a platform for those affected by the harmful legacies of nuclear weapons policies and practices, while also highlighting their interconnectedness with the current climate crisis and its impact on the Pacific Islands. The competition invited participants to submit entries in a variety of formats, intending to foster an open, inclusive, and creative process to engage grassroots communities and amplify voices not typically heard in international policy debates.

A panel of expert judges comprising of artists, experts, and nuclear justice advocates from the Pacific selected five winners:

- ★ Luisa Tuilau (poem recitation video, “I walk BRAVO”)
- ★ Bedi Racule (poem, “See you soon, lagoon”)
- ★ Sharon Kumar (poem recitation video, “Our Pacific”)
- ★ Dorell Ben (poem and art series “Blood in the Water”)
- ★ Mere Tuilau (poem, “The Elephant in the Room”)

Bedi Racule’s poem, “See you soon, lagoon,” eloquently juxtaposes her love for nature with a deep sense of loss. Mere Tuilau’s poem, “The Elephant in the Room,” is a powerful rendition that challenges current climate change and nuclear legacy diplomacy. Sharon Kumar’s poem, “Our Pacific,” passionately shares how vulnerable the Pacific Islands are to the threat of climate change. Luisa Tuilau’s poem, “I walk BRAVO,” powerfully portrays the legacy of the nuclear tests at Bikini Atoll. And, Dorell Ben’s poem and art series, “Blood in the Water,” conveys a sense of loss over climate change and the impact of humanity on the Pacific Ocean.

Each winner received a monetary prize for their entries, along with the opportunity to produce fully funded videos that showcase their stories and/or the impact of nuclear policies, practices, and climate change on their communities. Additionally, they were given the opportunity to speak at an international forum to help raise global awareness of the shared responsibility to address human and environmental security challenges in the Pacific Islands.

Following the competition, APLN co-hosted a webinar with the New Zealand Centre for Global Studies (NZCGS) in November 2022 on nuclear and climate injustice, where the winners presented their entries and shared the message and creative processes behind their work. The competition winners highlighted the legacy of nuclear weapons testing and the existential threat of climate change

in the Pacific Islands. Topics discussed included the escalating militarisation and security concerns in the Pacific region, historical and ongoing environmental and health impacts of nuclear testing, connections between nuclear injustice, climate change, and geopolitical agreements, the significance of the ocean, water scarcity, cultural practices, and societal issues, as well as the importance of youth activism and collective action in addressing these interconnected challenges.

In the following months, we collaborated with the winners to produce a series of impactful videos. Dorell Ben's powerful art film, "Blood in the Water," explores themes of ancestry, legacy, and the ocean's connection to climate change and Indigenous sovereignty struggles in the Pacific. Luisa Tuilau shares the story of a Marshallese family affected by nuclear testing, highlighting ongoing impacts and their hope for the future. Bedi Racule brought her poem, "See You Soon, Lagoon," to life, depicting the trauma and loss endured by a woman from Bikini Atoll due to nuclear weapons testing in the Marshall Islands by the United States.



Screenshot from Bedi Racule's video *See You Soon, Lagoon*. Photo Credit: APLN

We concluded Year 1 activities by hosting a session on “Pacific Islands and Disarmament” at the Tenth Meeting of the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP) Study Group on Nonproliferation and Disarmament (NPD) in the Asia-Pacific, which took place in Bangkok, Thailand. CSCAP provides a dialogue mechanism for scholars, officials, and other individuals to discuss political and security issues facing the region. The CSCAP NPD Study Group specifically aims to “discuss specific capacity-building activities that need to be undertaken to facilitate implementation of the relevant treaties, conventions, agreements, and other arrangements that relate to nonproliferation, disarmament, and the peaceful use of nuclear technology.”⁷⁴ The panelists – Professor Vijay Naidu (Professor, School of Law and Social Sciences, University of the South Pacific), Bedi Racule (Ecumenical Enabler for Climate Justice, Pacific Conference of Churches), and Henrietta McNeill (Fulbright Scholar and PhD Candidate in Pacific security) – delivered exceptional presentations and actively engaged in insightful discussions with fellow participants. Notably, this marked the first time in CSCAP’s 30-year history that they had participants from the Pacific Islands. The discussions revolved around the much-needed conversation on the impact of nuclear testing and current nuclear policies of states on the region.



APLN Panelists at the TPNW2MSP Side Event at the United Nations, New York in November 2023. Photo credit: APLN.

⁷⁴ CSCAP, Nonproliferation and Disarmament (NPD), CSCAP, <https://www.cscap.org/index.php?page=nonproliferation-and-disarmament-npd>

As part of Year 2, we organised a side event at the Second Meeting of States Parties to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW 2MSP) at the United Nations in New York in November 2023. In the months leading up to the event, we worked closely with our expert panelists from the Pacific – Maima Koro (Pacific Research Fellow, University of Adelaide), Dimity Hawkins (Co-Coordinator, Nuclear Truth Project), Bedi Racule, and Tarcisius Kabutaulaka (Associate Professor, University of Hawai'i) – to organise the event. The discussion focused on the challenges posed by contemporary nuclear weapons policies in the Pacific region, with panelists making presentations on strategies to strengthen the South Pacific Nuclear-Free Zone. The event was well-attended, fostering engaging open-floor discussions. Topics discussed included the historical and ongoing impacts of nuclear colonialism in the Pacific region, efforts towards nuclear justice, reparations, and self-determination for affected communities, the significance of the SPNFZ/ Rarotonga Treaty in prohibiting nuclear testing and possession in the region, and concerns about ongoing geopolitical tensions and militarisation, including the AUKUS agreement and military base expansions. The panelists emphasised the importance of listening to affected communities, advocating for policy change, and addressing the broader implications of nuclear issues, while also highlighting the need for broader awareness and action to address the impacts of nuclear weapons in the Pacific.

Summary of Year 1 and Year 2 Papers

A series of papers were commissioned throughout Year 1 and Year 2 to support project activities and highlight Pacific perspectives on Anthropocene-related injustices and inequities, the effects of past and present nuclear policies and practices, and contemporary geopolitical security debates in the region. The paper authors, topics, and summaries are outlined below:

Milla Vaha, “The Pacific’s Nuclear Legacy in the Context of the Climate Crisis”

Milla Vaha is a Senior Lecturer in Politics and International Affairs at the School of Law and Social Sciences at the University of the South Pacific, where she focuses her research on normative dimensions of climate change and its existential threat to atoll states and other island communities. In this paper, she explores the intertwined issues of nuclear legacy and climate change in the Pacific region. Pacific peoples continue to face severe impacts from fifty years of atomic testing by nuclear weapons states on their health, environments, and livelihoods. Climate change insecurities act as a threat multiplier to the nuclear legacy in the region. For instance, Runit Dome, which houses radioactive waste, is at risk of cracking or leaking due to rising sea levels and “stronger, more frequent, and unpredictable tropical storms.” However, Vaha also notes that despite these ongoing issues, Pacific peoples “have actively resisted victimisation

and taken leadership in both nuclear disarmament and climate change spaces.” They have called for “recognition of the harm caused by nuclear testing in their territories” and highlighted the increasing need for assistance due to the threat multiplier of climate change. She emphasises the need for the nuclear powers that have inflicted harm upon the region to continue to be held accountable by the impacted countries and territories “until fair and sufficient means and mechanisms to remedy these harms have been found.” She notes that what is “fair and sufficient” is up to the affected communities to decide.

Maima Koro, “Relational Security: Ethical Dilemmas of Geopolitics in the Blue Pacific Continent”

Maima Koro is a Pacific Research Fellow for the Regional Perspectives Project at the University of Adelaide, where she focuses her research on international relations, global security, geopolitics, development studies, ethics, and capacity development. In this paper, she emphasises the importance of “relational security” and the need for Pacific peoples to be consulted as equal partners in decisions that impact their communities. She also highlights the ethical dilemmas faced by Pacific people in the face of intense global competition and the complex ethical considerations that arise due to different understandings of security and power. The paper calls for a comprehensive analysis of the ethical dilemmas faced by Pacific people and emphasises the need for transparency and proper consultations in decision-making processes. The current priority is to provide space for Pacific nations to engage in internal and regional discussions to realise their vision of a “secure, stable, and prosperous” Blue Pacific Continent. It is crucial to reframe political and policy language to avoid forcing binary geopolitical choices onto Pacific Island countries, which undermines their sovereignty. Concrete actions, rather than mere announcements, are needed to genuinely address the region’s security and stability based on Pacific Leaders’ priorities. For this purpose, it is imperative that global powers engage with Pacific nations on equal footing prior to making decisions that impact their communities. Recognising the autonomy of Pacific peoples, it is important not to speak on their behalf, make assumptions, or act without consultation. Prioritising peace over conflict for the Blue Pacific Continent remains paramount, with a focus on relational security that respects the profound connection Pacific people have with their land, ocean, heritage, and fellow inhabitants across generations.

Patrick Kaiku, “Nuclear Justice for the Marshall Islands in the Age of Geopolitical Rivalry in the Pacific”

Patrick Kaiku is a full-time teaching fellow in the Political Science Strand at the University of Papua New Guinea, where he focuses his research on diplomacy and Pacific politics. In this paper, he explains that there is fear in the Pacific that competition between the United States and China threatens to once again become an avenue by which two nuclear-armed great powers use the Pacific

Islands as a playground for their own strategic goals. In their efforts to enlist the support and cooperation of Pacific Island states into their geostrategic considerations, these two nuclear-armed powers could also create divisions and misunderstandings amongst Pacific Island countries, weakening the solidarity that is needed for addressing the collective challenges of the region. To avoid inflicting further harm on an already vulnerable population and environment, Kaiku says that the international community, particularly the United States, must recognise the perverse impact that nuclear weapons have had on the region and decisively pursue nuclear justice initiatives as outlined in the National Nuclear Commission Strategy for Coordinated Action 2020-2023 (NNC Strategy). He recommends that nuclear justice be pursued as a regional agenda for the Pacific Islands as opposed to a narrow effort by the Marshall Islands. Kaiku also supports an international reckoning for the nuclear destruction wrought upon the Marshall Islands and asks that the international community focus its efforts on the five pillars of nuclear justice proposed in the NNC Strategy: “Compensation, Health Care, Environment, National Capacity, and Education and Awareness.” For Kaiku, nuclear justice does not stop at material compensation. In addition, the international community must build nuclear justice initiatives around a genuine understanding of the identities of island communities and Pacific connections to land and ocean.

Sylvia C. Frain and Fiona Amundsen, “Seeing the Sun: Nuclear (in)visibility in the Mariana Islands of Guam & Tinian”

Sylvia Frain is co-founder of the non-profit Fāha’ Digital Media, which seeks to support Indigenous storytellers while developing an equitable film industry in the Mariana Islands, and Fiona Amundsen is an Associate Professor at the School of Art and Design at Auckland University of Technology. In this essay, they examine the historical and contemporary impacts of nuclear policies and practices on the Mariana Islands. Through the use of photographic artworks and community-centered research, the essay calls for a re-evaluation of the nuclear legacy and the development of ethical visual methodologies to support nuclear justice and disarmament efforts. It highlights the ongoing consequences of US nuclear testing and military presence on the Indigenous Chamorro people of Guam and the residents of Tinian, including “subpar medical services...and the refusal to return ancestral Chamorro land (tāno).” Amundsen’s photographic works captured in Guam and Tinian aim to visually represent the unseen damage caused by radiation through experimental film processing techniques. Methods include using water from Merizo Pier, which contains trace residue of radiation, as well as chemiluminescence, which “damages the film by creating white spots of fogging that prevent visibility of the initial photographed image.” This process mirrors “how radiation resides in the body’s DNA, damaging it over time.” The authors emphasise the need to challenge the dominant narratives of nuclear imperialism and advocate for the visibility of marginalised voices and experiences. They also underscore the importance of various forms of resistance and

recognition, including artistic, legal, and political avenues, to address the complex histories and ongoing struggles of the Mariana Islands.

Brooke Takala, “Keeping Nuclear Memories Alive”

Brooke Takala is a Marshallese national and independent scholar with a background in Ethnic Studies and Education. In this essay, she explores the history of nuclear resistance movements in the Pacific Islands, such as Marshall Islands’ ERUB (Enewetak, Rongelap, Utrik, and Bikini) collective, as well as the Nuclear Free and Independent Pacific (NFIP) movement. These movements aimed to protest nuclear weapons testing and advocate for the rights of affected communities, particularly indigenous peoples. However, Takala argues that contemporary advocacy efforts have shifted away from the central lens of decolonisation and indigenous rights, becoming more centralised and western-focused. Current campaigns often portray Pacific Islanders as passive victims in need of Western protection. This approach strips away agency and perpetuates collective victimhood. Even well-intentioned actors may inadvertently perpetuate oppressive systems. This has led to the erasure of the core aspects of Pacific nuclear resistance movements and the marginalisation of those directly affected by radiation. Takala calls for a return to decolonisation as a central principle of the movement and emphasises the importance of amplifying the voices of affected communities. To empower youth, decolonial education is crucial for challenging and repairing these structures of oppression. While Takala acknowledges the widespread impact of nuclear testing on the entire Pacific region, she emphasises that certain communities endure the direct impacts more harshly than others. Additionally, while recognising the significance of survivor testimonies in global disarmament efforts, Takala cautions against reducing individuals to mere narrators of trauma. She urges for a more comprehensive understanding of their lives and experiences beyond the scope of nuclear testing.

Nicole George, “Making the ‘Invisible’ Visible: Women and the Anti-Nuclear Resistance in the Pacific Islands”

Nicole George is an Associate Professor in the School of Political Science and International Studies at the University of Queensland, where her research focuses on the gendered politics of conflict and peacebuilding, violence, security, and participation. In this essay, she explores how Pacific peoples, especially women, have directly experienced the devastating impacts of nuclear testing in the region and contributed to regional and global achievements of the anti-nuclear movement. As Pacific Island leaders pursued political self-determination from the 1960s, they increasingly opposed these testing programs, with women leading campaigns for nuclear disarmament and justice for affected communities. Marshallese women like Darlene Keju and Lijon Eknilang led efforts to expose the devastating effects of US nuclear testing in the Marshall Islands. Keju’s research revealed high rates of cancer and birth defects, highlighting the

gendered impacts of radiation. Despite facing trauma and stigma, they testified internationally, challenging the narrative of nuclear testing as necessary for security. A 2005 comprehensive study confirmed the disproportionate impact on Marshallese women, with a mortality risk 37.5% higher for those developing certain cancers. Similarly, French Polynesian women mobilised to highlight the gendered legacies of nuclear testing, citing cancer, miscarriages, and caring for sick children as rights violations. And beyond the immediate test site countries, women across the Pacific, including activists in Fiji like Amelia Rokotuivuna, Taufu Vakatale, and Suliana Siwatibau, played crucial roles in anti-nuclear campaigns. Collaborating with religious leaders, they published educational materials and contributed to the Treaty of Rarotonga in 1985, which established a nuclear-free zone. More recently, Pacific Island women, including Fiji activist Vanessa Griffen, critically contributed to the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear weapons (ICAN), which ultimately led to the creation of the UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. In her 2017 treaty conference address, Griffen emphasised the health impacts of testing on women and demanded strict monitoring of test sites by the US and France to prevent further harm to Pacific communities and the environment.

Jim Green and Dimity Hawkins, “The Politics of Nuclear Waste Disposal: Lessons from Australia”

Jim Green is the National Nuclear-Free Campaigner with Friends of the Earth Australia, and Dimity Hawkins is an Australian nuclear-free activist and researcher, co-founder of the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), and co-coordinator of the Nuclear Truth Project. In this paper, Green and Hawkins explore Australia’s long and complex engagement with nuclear waste issues, arguing that the country’s history of radioactive waste management serves as a cautionary tale, demonstrating the failure of authoritarian approaches and the necessity for fundamental change. Community opposition to imposed waste sites has been effective, highlighting the importance of listening to affected and often marginalised communities, particularly First Nations peoples who bear the brunt of these harms. As the international community moves towards more responsible waste management strategies, Australia must heed the lessons of the past and adopt a cooperative and inclusive approach. Green and Hawkins argue that this approach should prioritise democratic rights, meaningful consent from affected communities, and alignment with international human rights standards, including the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Amendments to existing legislation, such as the National Radioactive Waste Management Act, are necessary to empower Indigenous communities and ensure a fair and transparent process. Additionally, the government must address existing waste management issues and establish a comprehensive national inquiry to explore future waste management options. This includes cleaning up and monitoring all British nuclear weapons test sites in Australia in accordance with international obligations.

Becky Alexis-Martin, Qurat Ul Ain, Kolby Kaller, Ben Donaldson, and Matthew Maslen, “Treaty on the Prohibition Nuclear Weapons: Victim Assistance and Environmental Remediation in the Pacific”

In this paper, Becky Alexis-Martin, a pacifist academic at the University of Bradford, and her co-authors Qurat Ul Ain, Kolby Kaller, Ben Donaldson, and Matthew Maslen, provide insight into the benefits and challenges pertaining to victim assistance and environmental remediation in the wake of nuclear weapons testing in the Pacific. While evidence of environmental and health effects from the nuclear tests in the Pacific exists, their total long-term consequences still remain unknown, mainly because nuclear weapons possessor states are unwilling to provide transparency around historical nuclear military activity. Through Articles 6 and 7, the TPNW provides a framework for addressing the humanitarian and environmental consequences of nuclear testing and an avenue for international collaboration towards these ends. The report highlights the potential local and grassroots benefits of the TPNW to Pacific nations and recommends that Pasifika people are supported to engage with the decision-making process at every stage of its development and implementation. The authors recommend that mechanisms and safeguards be put in place, including long-term support, monitoring, auditing, and education, to ensure access to support is equitable and fair. The authors also recommend that Articles 6 and 7 are implemented through a lens of epistemic justice, which is justice of knowledge, and frameworks must be established to ensure parity of understanding among relevant Pacific communities, through translation of key materials into non-colonial languages and establishing community networks and mentors.

Vijay Naidu, “Strengthening a Nuclear-Free Pacific Region”

Vijay Naidu is Adjunct Professor at the University of the South Pacific, where he has served as Director of Development Studies, Head of School, Dean, and Pro-Vice Chancellor, and has researched and published on Fiji and the Pacific on a variety of areas including peace and nuclear test-related topics. In this paper, he argues that the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty is currently under threat from the increasing geostrategic competition in the Asia-Pacific. Four developments are particularly significant sources of risks for the South Pacific: first, the AUKUS agreement and the establishment and upgrading of military bases in Darwin in Australia; second, the growth of China’s influence in the region which has triggered a geostrategic contestation with Washington; third is Japan’s flushing out of high quantities of treated radioactive waste from the damaged Fukushima nuclear power plants into the Pacific Ocean; and fourth is suspected leaching of nuclear waste materials from the Runit Dome in Marshall Islands by rising sea level. Naidu’s paper closely scrutinises each of these sources of risks and their implications for the Pacific region, especially the Pacific Small Island Developing States (PSIDS), and for the SPNFZ Treaty. The author urges that despite threats and its weaknesses, the SPNFZ Treaty must be prevented from

falling apart, and considers ways in which the treaty can be strengthened. Beyond civil society advocacy, individual actions by small states and diplomatic pressures for all P5 states to ratify the SPNFZ Treaty, Naidu suggests that PSIDS should take collective regional actions through the PIF.

Marianne Hanson, “The Second Meeting of States Parties to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons: A Summary Report”

Marianne Hanson is an Honorary Associate Professor at the University of Queensland, where her research focuses on international security, arms control, disarmament, international organisations, and international law. In this paper, she provides a comprehensive summary of the Second Meeting of States Parties to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW2MSP), held at the United Nations Headquarters in New York from November 27 to December 1, 2023. The report delves into the reported findings and proposed new areas of work by states and Working Groups during the 2MSP, with a specific focus on affected communities, nuclear risks, and the concept of nuclear deterrence. The report covers 2MSP discussions on supporting communities affected by nuclear weapons, emphasizing the importance of victim assistance and environmental remediation. The Affected Communities Statement stressed the enduring impact of nuclear weapons and the responsibility of states to act. Historical neglect by nuclear weapon states was criticised, and concerns were raised about nuclear testing’s intersection with climate change and environmental pollution. A proposal to develop terms of reference for the establishment of a trust fund at 3MSP was welcomed, although Fiji cautioned against allowing progress on this front to serve as a substitute for nuclear testing states joining the TPNW. The Scientific Advisory Group (SAG) emphasised growing risks associated with nuclear weapons, calling for comprehensive research and a UN-mandated study. The Joint Declaration published at the end of the 2MSP urged addressing emerging scientific and technological challenges to the treaty. There was also a push to challenge nuclear deterrence as obstructive to disarmament, with a consultative process led by Ambassador Alexander Kmentt aiming to understand non-nuclear states’ security concerns. Criticism of nuclear deterrence focused on its flawed assumptions and risks. Challenges the 2MSP faced included the absence of nuclear-armed states, limiting the treaty’s impact on nuclear postures and policies. Some US allies were observers, but their stance varied. Additionally, disagreements arose over the wording of statements on the CTBT and condemning nuclear sharing arrangements, with concerns about the perceived targeting of certain countries. Hanson concludes that despite the limitations, the Meetings of States Parties to the TPNW are the sole significant forum for addressing nuclear weapons in a productive manner, and that these meetings should not be dismissed lightly.

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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