Abstract

Melanesia is becoming a region of many partners, expanding diplomatic options and a new sense of independence. The wider context of the new Melanesian assertiveness is one in which China is a rising power and Indonesia is forging closer links with the western Pacific. The impetus to Fiji’s new assertiveness arose from the diplomatic isolation imposed upon it by Australia and New Zealand after the 2006 military coup. Papua New Guinea’s new confidence is founded upon its liquefied natural gas boom. Even Solomon Islands is expanding diplomatic connections. Regionally, the change can be seen in the Melanesian Spearhead Group, which now counts Indonesia among its members, and in Fiji’s push for its own vision of Pacific regionalism. Australia and New Zealand nevertheless remain the indispensable countries in the region. Australia’s commitment to Melanesia remains constant but without the bold initiatives and interventionist enthusiasm of the early RAMSI years.

Key words: Melanesia, regionalism, West Papua, Indonesia, diplomacy

During the second half of the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) decade, 2003 to 2013, the old simplicities about Pacific regionalism and the international relations of Melanesia yielded to a more complex regional environment. Fiji and Papua New Guinea (PNG) asserted new independence in foreign policy. Sub-regionalism, in the form of the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) and the Pacific Islands Development Forum, began to challenge the primacy in regional affairs of the long-established Pacific Islands Forum. Melanesian and other Pacific states embraced activism on the United Nations (UN) agenda of issues, especially climate change, and at the UN in New York they organised the Pacific Small Island Developing States Group, which owed nothing to Australia and New Zealand (Tarte 2014).

Australia’s commitment to the region remains constant but without the bold initiatives and interventionist enthusiasm of the early RAMSI years. The wider context of the new Melanesian assertiveness is one in which China is a rising power in the region, the United States is responding to that rise, and Indonesia is claiming a Melanesian identity for its easternmost provinces as part of a concerted effort to forge closer links with the island countries of the western Pacific. Japan, China, the United States, Korea, India, Indonesia, Israel and the European Union are all counted among the external states that have deepened their long-term connection with Melanesia in recent years, while the United Arab Emirates...
Russia and Georgia are recent minor players on the scene. France is a Pacific Islands power with three Pacific territories. In this analysis, we focus on China and Indonesia, which are steadily enhancing their presence.

China has no grand strategy to dominate Melanesia, but the interests of Chinese companies are served by the Chinese government’s policy focus on funding for infrastructure, which is exemplified on a grand scale and for the whole of East Asia by the recent formation of the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank in Shanghai. China has lots of money to lend to Melanesian countries, and wants to lend it for projects by Chinese state-owned enterprises and other companies. Chinese construction companies have been responsible for a succession of regional infrastructure projects: the Nadarivatu hydro-electric scheme in Fiji; the major redevelopment of the port of Lae in PNG; a freeway network for Port Moresby in advance of the 2015 South Pacific Games; a convention centre in Port Vila, Vanuatu; and, further afield in the Pacific, the reconstruction of the centre of Tonga’s capital, Nuku’alofa, after riots destroyed it in 2006. These projects, all completed in the last three years, signal the infrastructure emphasis in China’s contemporary foreign economic policy—in South East Asia, Africa, Latin America and, almost incidentally, in Melanesia as well. Chinese companies have been also investing in resource projects in Melanesia. They are leaders in mining bauxite and gold in Fiji, and nickel in PNG, where Ramu Nickel has a major operation with its own refinery. On the horizon lies the possibility of seabed mining in the vast maritime exclusive economic zones of Melanesia, a field of mine technology where China has particular expertise (Hannan & Firth 2015).

The broadening and diversification of Pacific Island relations with the rest of the world was symbolised by the visits of Chinese President Xi Jinping and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Fiji in late 2014 and of Indonesian President Joko Widodo to PNG in 2015.

Fiji rolled out the red carpet for Xi Jinping in particular, and he responded with agreements on infrastructure, climate change technology, trade and investment with the eight Pacific countries that recognise the People’s Republic of China—Fiji, the Cook Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, Niue, PNG, Samoa, Tonga and Vanuatu. Of the Melanesian countries, only Solomon Islands, which recognises Taiwan, was missing yet even it has been accepting China’s soft loans. PNG, Fiji and Vanuatu are already familiar with Chinese largesse. At the Guangzhou China–Pacific development forum in 2013, the eight Island leaders were told that they could access $US1 billion in concessional loans and a further $US1 billion in commercial loans for development projects. Soft loans have their pitfalls, not least for small Island states, but they are highly attractive to Melanesian leaders in search of high-profile development projects (Pacific Institute of Public Policy 2013). China’s soft power is undermined by the resentment felt by many Pacific Islanders against the ‘new Chinese’ who have migrated to the region in scores of thousands in the last 20 years, but the growing regional profile of China in all its dimensions—in investment, trade, development assistance, diplomacy and even military cooperation—has the effect of giving the eight ‘recognising’ Pacific states a greater range of options in determining their foreign relations.

1. Fiji

For different reasons, Fiji and PNG were asserting a new autonomy in foreign policy by the second decade of the new century.

The impetus in Fiji’s case came from the diplomatic isolation imposed upon it in the wake of the 2006 military coup led by military commander and Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama. Australia led the way in imposing this isolation, especially after the military government abrogated the constitution in 2009, declared a state of emergency and took other measures that smacked far more of dictatorship than democracy. The government expelled foreign journalists, muzzled the media and revoked all judicial appointments before proceeding to impose control over the legal profession. A decade before, in response

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to the Fiji and Solomon Islands coups of 2000, the member states of the Pacific Islands Forum had signed the Biketawa Declaration, committing themselves to ‘upholding democratic processes and institutions which reflect national and local circumstances, including the peaceful transfer of power, the rule of law and the independence of the judiciary, just and honest government’. Democracy had been made a regional norm. Australia and New Zealand responded to the forceful overthrow of democracy in Fiji by asserting this norm, and the issue could never be reduced to one of Australia’s relations with Fiji alone. Inescapably, Australia’s response to the Fiji coup was a regional matter, a dimension of the problem unappreciated by those who called for Australia to resume relations with the coup regime swiftly and on grounds of Realpolitik.

The 2006 coup provoked protests and sanctions from Australia and New Zealand, but the dramatic consolidation of Bainimarama’s power in April 2009 had a far more damaging effect on Fiji’s international position. Fiji was suspended from the Forum within three weeks of abrogating its constitution. Announcing the suspension, the Chair of the Forum Toke Talagi argued that a regime ‘which displays such a total disregard for basic human rights, democracy and freedom’ had no place in the Forum (Fijilive 2009). A few months later, Fiji became only the second country in the history of the Commonwealth—the other was Nigeria in 1995—to be fully suspended from it, with aid stopped and participation in the Commonwealth Games barred (BBC News 2009).

Bainimarama responded by seeking friends elsewhere, adopting a ‘Look North’ foreign policy, and making frequent trips to China. He told the UN in 2011:

This year, it was my honour to open new Fijian Missions in both Indonesia and South Africa. The Fiji High Commission in Pretoria is our first diplomatic mission on the continent of Africa and we see it as a gateway to that great continent. Our new Embassy in Jakarta is intended to strengthen our warm fraternal relations with Indonesia. In the same spirit, I journey next week to Brazil to open Fiji’s first Embassy on the South American continent. In May this year, Mr President, Fiji had the privilege of being admitted to membership of the Non-Aligned Movement. We have pledged to play our full part in the Movement’s activities, particularly in the area of South-South Cooperation and Sustainable Development. (Bainimarama 2011)

As Fiji sought to construct a new, independent place in the international community, it added the Republic of Korea and the United Arab Emirates to the list of countries with Fiji diplomatic missions.

Australia and New Zealand could not dissuade the UN from accepting peacekeepers from Fiji, which boosted its military presence in the Guard Unit of the UN Assistance Mission for Iraq and sent peacekeepers to South Sudan, Abyei in northern Sudan, Darfur, Liberia and Timor Leste. Far from excluding Fijian peacekeepers, the UN was delighted to have them, and in 2013 a further 500 arrived in the Golan Heights as replacements for the departing Croatian, Japanese and Austrian troops withdrawn from the UN Disengagement Observer Force as violence in Syria intensified.

Such was Fiji’s growing diplomatic confidence that when a delegation from North Korea arrived in Fiji in 2012, they were told by the foreign minister Ratu Inoke Kubuabola that Fiji’s experience in peacekeeping qualified it to be a mediator in assisting the reunification of the two Koreas (Fijilive 2012). Earlier that year, Fiji had played host to Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov and agreed to visa-free travel between the two countries. In 2013, Fiji was elected chair of the G77 PLUS China, the body of 134 developing countries at the UN. Bainimarama soon found himself discussing bilateral ties and international affairs with Iran’s President Hassan Rouhani, who presided over the Non Aligned Movement (Fijilive 2013). Fiji became chair of the UN Convention on Climate Change Subsidiary Body on Implementation in 2014 and will stand for the presidency of the UN General Assembly in 2016. In the space of three years, Fiji arrived on the international stage as a minor but a recognised player with an independent foreign policy.
2. Solomon Islands

A new and more ambitious foreign policy also emerged in Solomon Islands in the latter half of the RAMSI decade and especially after 2013. Danny Philip resigned as prime minister under a cloud of allegations of misusing Taiwanese aid money and on the eve of a vote of no confidence in 2011. His successor, Gordon Darcy Lilo, who remained in office until the end of 2014, intensified and diversified Solomons’ diplomatic engagement outside the RAMSI countries.

The Solomons parliament’s 2011 Inquiry into the Appointment of Ambassadors and High Commissioners was significant not only in addressing public concerns on the opening of new missions, but more importantly as a review of the foreign ministry and foreign policy (National Parliament of Solomon Islands 2013). Top diplomats from all missions consolidated and affirmed Solomons’ ‘look north policy’ with a focus on development aid from Asian countries (Radio Australia 2011). Simultaneously, the policy of expanding political and economic ties saw key missions established in Geneva in 2011; Kuala Lumpur, Jakarta and Havana in 2013; and Wellington in 2014. Malaysia and Indonesia have been key investors in the logging industry for more than two decades, and are prospective investors in the mining industry. The mission in Cuba is the first and only Pacific embassy in the communist state, with relations centred on south–south development aid assistance, especially the training of Solomon Island medical students there. Despite New Zealand’s key role in RAMSI and in its bilateral aid program, it was only in 2014 that a mission in Wellington was realised. The mission in Geneva, catering for various UN offices and for the World Trade Organisation, was closed in 2013 citing financial reasons but reopened one year later. The country has diplomatic offices in Brussels as well as the United States, Cuba, Malaysia, Taiwan, Switzerland, Australia, New Zealand, Fiji and PNG.

Solomons’ foreign relations have not always been smooth sailing post-RAMSI. Solomons has recognised Taiwan since 1983 and maintained a mission in Taipei since 2000, and is the most populous of all Taiwan’s Pacific allies, but it welcomes investment and soft loans from the People’s Republic of China. Some observers think Lilo’s open dialogue with China and his tolerance towards Chinese investment and concessional loans are at variance with his country’s supposed allegiance to Taiwan (Sasako 2013b). Taipei provided $150 million (Solomons currency) annually for the government’s budget, yet China was Solomons’ main trading partner, accounting for half its exports (Sasako 2013a). In response to questions of faithfulness to Taiwan, Lilo affirmed its political support for Taiwan while declaring he was open to the opportunity of economic engagement with China:

Within the South, as you know, China will remain the major market. That inevitability cannot be eliminated from the equation of the way that we manage our international relations, international economy, international trade and even our foreign policy. . . opportunities will come about, as the opening of better relations will move to the more dynamic way of encompassing engagements other than just political issues, [such as] trade and economy (Radio Australia 2013).

In Solomon Islands as elsewhere in Melanesia, China’s economic presence and the potential it offers for the future are drawing even Taiwan’s Pacific allies into its orbit of opportunity.

3. Papua New Guinea

PNG’s liquefied natural gas boom coincided with the last years of RAMSI. After years of the construction phase of the giant project, which is bringing natural gas from the Southern Highlands via pipeline to Port Moresby, exports to Japan, Taiwan and China began in 2014. The boom is expected to double or even triple the size of the PNG economy, as measured in conventional terms, and a further doubling is expected when the Gulf Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) project comes on stream in 2021. This bonanza has produced a corresponding boost in the confidence of the country’s politicians to
assert PNG’s independent place in the world. A small shift of policy exemplified the change of mood in Port Moresby. In 2014, the government abolished the system of issuing visas on arrival to Australian citizens, having been thwarted for years in attempts to have PNG citizens issued with visas on arrival in Australia, though Foreign Affairs Minister Rimbink Pato talked of lifting these restrictions by the end of 2015. A temporary ban was also placed on Australians wishing to visit Bougainville following the revelation, which Peter O’Neill learnt from media reports, that Australia would be establishing a new diplomatic post on Buka as the date of the Bougainville independence referendum (probably 2019) grows closer. Australian Department of Foreign Affairs head Peter Varghese later admitted that Australia had not informed PNG beforehand (Radio Australia 2015b).

At the same time PNG, for long the principal recipient of Australian development assistance in the Pacific, became an aid donor in its own right, offering Solomon Islands almost $US40 million for a five-year development program, and Fiji $A20 million to defray the costs of holding the 2014 election. Other recipients have been Samoa, Tonga and Tuvalu, and PNG has promised Palau $US3.7 million to fund a smaller island states regional office (Oceania TV News 2015).

PNG has embarked upon a major expansion of its armed forces, with plans to more than double numbers from 2,000 to 4,000 regular personnel and 1,000 reserves by 2017, with another doubling to 10,000 by 2030. Having amended the Defence Act in 2010 to allow for PNG soldiers to participate in overseas peacekeeping operations, PNG now has small numbers of UN peacekeepers in South Sudan and to Darfur in Sudan, and looks to sending more in the future. Participation in UN peacekeeping gives PNG the opportunity to raise its UN profile, and its soldiers the chance to operate on the international stage. Meantime new diplomatic missions have opened in Shanghai, Bangkok, Geneva and Paris, and in 2013 Peter O’Neill became the first PNG prime minister to make an official visit to Israel, an old friend but one with which PNG is now forging closer relations. Prime Minister Benyamin Netanyahu agreed that Israel would offer training for Papua New Guinea Defence Force personnel and police in advance of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation meeting to take place in Port Moresby in 2018 (Firth 2014).

4. Melanesian Spearhead Group

Fiji’s most pointed assertion of foreign policy independence was aimed squarely at Australia and New Zealand. Suspended from the Pacific Islands Forum, Fiji sought alternatives, initially through the Melanesian Spearhead Group, which is the organisation of independent Melanesian countries (Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu) plus one political party, the pro-independence Front de Libération Nationale Kanak et Socialiste (FLNKS) from the French territory of New Caledonia. Bainimarama was due to become chair of the MSG in 2010 and organised a Pacific-wide MSG Plus meeting timed to overshadow the Pacific Island Forum leaders’ meeting, but at the last minute the meeting was postponed by Vanuatu. Bainimarama blamed Australia and New Zealand, and retaliated by expelling yet another Australian High Commissioner. Fiji’s annual MSG Plus meetings—only Pacific Island countries invited—became regular fixtures on the regional diplomatic calendar, and in 2013 they were institutionalised in the form of the Pacific Islands Development Forum, a regional organisation for Pacific Island states. As for the Pacific Islands Forum, Fiji was invited to rejoin after its 2014 election but declared it would not do until Australia and New Zealand were removed, prompting New Zealand prime minister John Key to point out that ‘it’s Australia and New Zealand that put in the money’. Without these two big brothers, he added, ‘exactly where will they get the money to do anything and the answer is nowhere—none of them have that’ (PINA 2015). Bainimarama softened his stance in 2015, saying he would not participate in any Forum leaders’ meeting until the issue of undue influence by Australia and New Zealand was addressed and committing Fiji to participate in Forum activities at the technical and ministerial levels (Fijilive 2015). Now that Fiji is being
asked to resume its full membership of the Forum, Bainimarama is using Fiji’s return as a bargaining chip in the debate over the remaking of regional architecture. The reform of regionalism is an issue of considerable concern to Australia and New Zealand, which have backed the Forum for more than 40 years as the premier regional institution covering the entire Pacific Islands region.

When Bainimarama finally became chair of the MSG in 2011, he brought a new energy to the task. MSG embraced trade liberalisation between member states; it established a Melanesian Green Climate Fund; it set up a skills movement scheme which is designed to do what Australia has never done for the region, that is, to open borders to the movement of regional professionals; it has developed a framework agreement for sharing of information on transnational crime and other law enforcement issues, which are regularly discussed by Melanesian police commissioners; and, at least on paper, the MSG has a Melanesian peacekeeping unit and a department of peacekeeping operations to smooth the way for Melanesian countries to offer their troops to the UN. The latter is a slightly watered down version of a regional rapid response security force agreed by the leaders in 2005 (May 2011). Indonesia has given $F1 million towards the cost of the new MSG Regional Police Academy at Nasova, Fiji (Fijilive 2014). After decades of being little more than talking shop for trade issues, the MSG—to some extent underwritten by financial assistance from China and Indonesia—has emerged as a regional organisation of substance.

The solidarity of MSG member states, however, cannot be taken for granted. Fiji and Solomon Islands fell into prolonged dispute over aviation in 2014, for example. The foreign ministries of both countries played out on the media. The stand-off lasted for six months and only in January 2015 did relations return to normal with resumption of flights.

MSG solidarity was also tested by the selection of the Pacific Islands Forum Secretary General in 2013. Fiji received the approval of MSG states in late 2012 when it announced its candidate for the post, former Minister of Foreign Affairs Kaliopate Tavola, one of the Pacific’s most experienced diplomats. However, by early 2013, Solomon Islands had proposed its candidate Jimmy Rogers, and PNG another in the person of Dame Meg Taylor. While lobbying and manoeuvring ensued, many questioned the solidarity of the MSG leaders who had initially given Tavola their assurance of support. Dame Meg was elected in July 2013, a diplomatic victory for PNG. As the prime minister of a country that backed Fiji after its coups, Peter O’Neill is also said to have been offended by Bainimarama’s declaration during the visit by President Xi that China alone had supported Fiji during its diplomatic isolation.

More significantly, West Papua has been a sensitive issue for the MSG, whose origins in the 1980s were characterised by calls for the complete decolonisation of Melanesia. At the time, the focus of Melanesia’s independent states was on the French territory of New Caledonia, and for that reason they included in their original membership a New Caledonian political party favouring independence, the FLNKS. In recent years, a second independence issue has taken centre stage in the form of the movement for the independence of the Indonesian provinces of Papua and West Papua. Indonesia has been an observer member of the Melanesian Spearhead Group since 2011, and has used its membership as a way of countering potential Pacific support for West Papuan independence and dispatching pro-Indonesian West Papuans to MSG meetings. For their part, independence groups in West Papua came together in 2014 as the United Liberation Movement for West Papua and applied for membership of the MSG. In response, Indonesia intensified its diplomatic contacts with the region: President Yudhoyono © 2015 The Authors. Asia and the Pacific Policy Studies published by Crawford School of Public Policy at The Australian National University and Wiley Publishing Asia Pty Ltd
gave the keynote address at the Second Summit of the Pacific Islands Development Forum in Nadi in 2014. Indonesian foreign minister Retno Marsudi visited Fiji, Solomons and PNG in March 2015, and President Joko Widodo made an official visit to PNG two months later.

Confronted in 2013 with a similar application for membership, on that occasion from the West Papua National Coalition for Liberation, the MSG deferred the issue but endorsed ‘the inalienable rights of the people of West Papua towards self-determination as provided for under the preamble of the MSG constitution’ and moved that ‘the concerns of the MSG regarding the human rights violations and other forms of atrocities relating to the West Papuan people be raised with the Government of Indonesia bilaterally and as a Group’ (MSG 2013). In early 2014 Indonesia organised an official visit to West Papua by Melanesian foreign ministers who subsequently put their names to a declaration by the MSG and Indonesia that they respected ‘our respective sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity and the principle of non-interference in each other’s affairs, consistent with the Charter of the United Nations’ (MSG 2014). Vanuatu, traditionally a supporter of West Papuan independence, stood aside from the process, revealing cracks in MSG solidarity.

Popular sentiment throughout independent Melanesia supports West Papuan independence, and the issue has gained traction in recent years through social media and protest movements such as the Fiji Solidarity Movement for West Papua’s Freedom and Solomon Islands for West Papua, and the PNG Union for a Free West Papua, which staged a protest at the airport when President Widodo arrived in Port Moresby in 2015. The effect of this agitation was to present the governments of Fiji, Solomons, PNG and Vanuatu with a choice between declaring support for West Papua independence, or else siding as usual with Indonesia on a sensitive issue of territorial integrity. The pressure was evident in the new stance taken by Peter O’Neill in adopting a stronger tone on human rights issues in West Papua and in calling on Indonesia to fulfil the promise of its former president, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, to reduce the number of troops stationed in West Papua.

Indonesia adopted the strategy of proclaiming a Melanesian identity to open the way to some version of MSG membership, and offered assistance to Melanesian countries. Indonesian aid helps to fund the MSG’s regional police academy in Fiji, and on her visit to the region the Indonesian foreign minister pointed to the $US20 million provided by Indonesia for capacity building in Melanesian countries. She told her audience in Port Moresby that ‘Indonesia is home to more than 11 million Melanesians. So Indonesia is Melanesia and Melanesia is Indonesia. We share a common land border and culture with our next biggest Melanesian country, PNG’ (PNG Post-Courier 2015).

According to Indonesian definitions, the provinces of Papua, West Papua, Maluku, North Maluku and East Nusa Tenggara are all part of Melanesia, and, in a unique a five-equals-one formulation under the name ‘Indonesia’, they applied for membership as an associate member of the Melanesian Spearhead Group. A meeting of the five provincial governors and the national government took place in the Maluku capital of Ambon in March 2015, when it was agreed that they could apply for MSG membership with the support of the Indonesian government. The whole aim of this initiative was to prevent the United Liberation Movement for West Papua from joining the MSG.

The subsequent visit to Port Moresby by the Indonesian President had the desired effect. Following it, the PNG prime minister announced his support for Indonesia. Fiji said the same, and at the MSG leaders’ meeting in Honiara in June 2015 Indonesia became an associate member of the MSG in the form of its five ‘Melanesian’ provinces. The result was a defeat for the United Liberation Movement for West Papua, which was granted observer status as a ‘development partner representing the welfare of Melanesian people living outside’ (Radio New Zealand International 2015). The addition of Indonesia to the MSG, even as an associate member, has the potential...
over time to transform it into a regional organisation with one foot in the Pacific and the other in South East Asia, and will probably bring with it additional Indonesian funding that might add to the significance of the body.

5. Conclusion

No longer so dependent on their traditional partners Australia and New Zealand, Melanesian countries are finding new friends through a variety of forums and diplomatic initiatives. Joanne Wallis has argued that ‘it may be time for Australian policymakers to see the region not as an “arc of instability”, but instead as an “arc of opportunity” ’ (Wallis 2012, p. 1). The governments of Melanesian countries, buoyed by the growing diversity of their diplomatic partners, certainly see this post-RAMSI era as a time of opportunity. These positive prospects, it should be noted, are ones that primarily apply to Melanesian states rather than to Melanesian people. Fiji stands midway on the UN Human Development Index, but Vanuatu, Solomon Islands and especially PNG stand far lower, with their people largely excluded from the benefits of economic growth.

In Solomon Islands, the drawdown of RAMSI has led to a re-evaluation of foreign policy and to the implementation of a Look North policy that in practical terms is taking the country, which recognises Taiwan, closer to China. As RAMSI is reconfigured as bilateral aid, and as RAMSI plans its complete withdrawal in 2017, Australia’s presence returns to being bilateral like that of other development partners, and Solomons exercises its freedom to seek friends elsewhere.

In PNG, the LNG boom has changed the mentality of an entire generation of the nation’s political elite, who now see their country as the natural leader of Pacific Island countries, and one to which the small Pacific states turn for development assistance and even investment. PNG companies are investing in other Pacific countries such as Solomons and Samoa. PNG is an aid donor, it joined the international community in sending relief assistance to Vanuatu after the cyclone, and the country’s prime minister felt confident enough to call upon Indonesia to reduce its military presence in West Papua (Radio Australia 2015a).

Isolation imposed by Australia and New Zealand created an opportunity for Fiji to find international legitimacy in new places. Fiji found partners in the United Arab Emirates, Iran and South Korea, among others, ultimately becoming chair of G-77 + China group and being recognised on the international stage. In crafting this new approach, Bainimarama was driven by concerns about the legitimacy of his government both abroad and at home, and never lost an opportunity to remind the people of Fiji that Australia and New Zealand were treating them badly. Now that the long-promised election has secured his dominance of Fiji’s affairs, Bainimarama’s tone has shifted to one of vindication, while his policy on regionalism remains one of undermining the Pacific Islands Forum in order to promote the role of the MSG and of his own Pacific Islands Development Forum.

Nevertheless, Australia and New Zealand remain central external players in Melanesian affairs, as we were reminded by the international response to the devastation wrought by Cyclone Pam in Vanuatu in 2015. No one expected that response to be led by China; leadership came, as is customary, from Australia and New Zealand. China gave Vanuatu $US5 million worth of assistance and Indonesia sent aid worth more than $US2 million, but the aircraft of the Royal Australian Air Force and the Royal New Zealand Air Force were the first to land with supplies in Vila, and Australian and New Zealand relief continued to come in large quantities. The Australian foreign minister Julie Bishop visited Vanuatu and the overall emergency response by Australia and New Zealand was substantial.

Australia and New Zealand remain the indispensable countries in the region. They are the default external states to which Melanesian governments turn in times of natural disaster or in the expectation of other assistance. Melanesia and the rest of the Pacific Islands emerged largely unscathed from the massive reductions in Australia’s aid budget announced in May 2015, while Australia’s foreign minister Julie Bishop has demonstrated her adept-
ness in dealing with Melanesian countries and in establishing the good personal relationships with Island leaders that are the key to Australia’s regional reputation.

The Melanesia with which Australia and New Zealand now deal, however, is a region of many partners, expanding diplomatic options and a new sense of independence.

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