As strategic competition between China and traditional powers, particularly the US, rapidly unfolds in the Indo-Pacific region, it is worth examining the response of the Pacific Island countries (PICs). This two-part series provides a comparative analysis of the addresses by 12 PIC leaders to the 75th session of the United Nations (UN) General Assembly in September 2020. Table 1 summarises the shared and special concerns of these countries (the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Palau, Papua New Guinea (PNG), Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu). Part one focuses on the countries’ shared concerns and how they relate to big power competition. Part two discusses the special concerns of some PICs and their impact on the countries’ relations with traditional powers and China. Big power competition is just one of the many priorities for Pacific leaders, and their UN speeches discussed PICs’ various national, regional and international priorities.

Table 1. Pacific Island leaders’ concerns

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Shared concerns</th>
<th>COVID-19, multilateralism, climate change, marine resources conservation, 2030 UN Sustainable Development Goals</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Special concerns</td>
<td>The US–China rivalry, China–Taiwan competition, UN Security Council reform, Cuba, West Papua, Bougainville, aid and debt relief, least developed countries status, the nuclear issue</td>
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Source: Compiled by author.

Shared concerns

COVID-19 has, unsurprisingly, been a focus for all PIC leaders. Although 11 PICs recorded zero active cases of COVID-19 as of 6 October 2020 (WHO 2020:1), this was achieved at the cost of economic devastation caused by border closures. In their speeches, Pacific leaders revealed the pandemic’s severe impact on their economies. For example, COVID-19 has devastated Fiji’s pillar industries of tourism (accounting for more than 40 per cent of the economy) and garment manufacturing. Pacific leaders also emphasised the need to ensure affordable and accessible vaccines for all nations, especially small ones. The president of Nauru Lionel Rouwen Aingimea went further by calling out the World Health Organisation for being slow to declare the pandemic, arguing that ‘[t]his tells us there is much room for improvement’.

At the UN, leaders of all PICs, big and small, have voiced firm support for multilateralism, which requires the UN to play a central role in addressing global challenges and member states to take collective action. As PNG’s Prime Minister James Marape said in his address, the importance of the UN to small countries cannot be overstated. The prime minister of Tuvalu Kausea Natano reiterated that his country remains committed to effective multilateralism. These remarks are in line with PICs’ longstanding position of relying on UN-centric multilateralism to protect their interests as small states.

Climate change was also mentioned unanimously by Pacific leaders. It is little wonder why, as the Pacific Islands are bearing the brunt of climate change, despite being the smallest emitters of greenhouse gases. Labelling climate change as their single largest threat, Pacific leaders emphasised the necessity of capping global temperature rise at 1.5 degrees Celsius — an aspirational goal of the 2015 Paris Agreement — and called for decarbonisation and renewable energy development. For example, Palau is making preparations to reach its 45 per cent renewable energy target by 2025. However, given the differences between PICs in terms of climate impact and available resources, their priorities differ. For example, low-lying atoll states such as Kiribati and Tuvalu face an immediate threat to survival due to sea level rise, while PNG has the task of balancing logging for revenue and preserving its forests to mitigate climate change impact.

A fourth common focus of Pacific leaders relates to the conservation of fisheries and other marine resources. As large ocean states, PICs rely on the ocean for sustenance and development. Leaders from FSM, Marshall Islands, Solomon Islands and Tonga called on distant-water fishing nations to reduce illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing activities...
in the Pacific. Two further issues stood out in Pacific leaders’ speeches. First, five countries (FSM, Kiribati, PNG, Solomon Islands and Tonga) highlighted the need to ensure PICs’ maritime zone delineation in accordance with the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea will not be challenged by sea level rise. This issue has alarmed Pacific leaders and received growing attention in recent years. For example, the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat organised a regional conference in September 2020 on Securing the Limits of the Blue Pacific: Legal Options and Institutional Responses to the Impacts of Sea Level Rise on Maritime Zones, in the Context of International Law, which aimed to develop a collective approach and preserve PICs’ existing rights over maritime zones. Second, seabed mining, a contentious issue in the region, was captured in some Pacific leaders’ addresses and their attitudes were nuanced. The prime minister of Fiji pledged to maintain his country’s moratorium on sea-bed mining for the rest of the decade. In contrast, the leaders of Tonga and Nauru advocated for a balance between marine environmental protection and seabed mining as a potentially important economic activity.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) also received much attention from Pacific leaders. These indicators are serving as important benchmarks for Pacific governments to measure achievements in promoting sustainable economic and social development. In their speeches, Pacific leaders reaffirmed their commitment to delivering the SDGs by 2030. In July 2020, the Solomon Islands government submitted its first voluntary national review report on SDG implementation to the UN Secretariat. The prime ministers of PNG and Samoa also stressed the need to further combat gender-based violence, which is the fifth SDG.

These shared concerns represent top-tier issues on the agendas of Pacific leaders. They will feature prominently in PICs’ engagement with both traditional powers and China in the context of their geopolitical competition in the region.

Current trends in priority areas for PICs

In terms of COVID-19, both traditional partners and China have provided grants and medical supplies to PICs since the outbreak of the pandemic. This can be perceived as an effort to fulfill their moral duties as responsible development partners as well as to expand influence in the region. It is likely PICs will continue to receive medical and financial support from these donors for virus prevention and economic recovery in the context of big power competition. In addition, a COVID-19 vaccine could be a new focus of competition. Traditional partners such as the US, Australia and New Zealand have promised to distribute vaccines to PICs when they become available. China pledged to make Chinese-made vaccines a global public good and provide them to developing countries on a priority basis.

With respect to climate change, PICs will continue to expect large emitters, especially China and the US, to play a leading role in substantially reducing greenhouse gas emissions. However, climate-related aid to PICs by China and the US could be more symbolic relative to PICs’ expectations. PICs will likely ask Australia, as the largest neighbour, to take more ambitious measures to cut emissions.

Marine resources conservation will be another sector for PICs to seek cooperation with external partners. Australia, the US and New Zealand have played a crucial role in supporting PICs to patrol their massive exclusive economic zones. In contrast, China could be an active partner to some PICs in seabed mining. The Chinese government has shown strong interest in this sector and in recent years started to establish contacts with relevant government agencies in the region. The Chinese state-owned enterprise Mawei Shipbuilding Limited was contracted by Nautilus Minerals to build the seafloor production support vessel for the Solwara 1 project, which, before it failed, was expected to be the world's first seabed mining project in the Bismarck Sea off PNG.

PICs will also actively seek support from development partners in the implementation of the SDGs. Although the PICs have listed the SDGs as a priority, more external assistance is needed. Australia, New Zealand, China and the US have been the principal donors in the Pacific. Heightened geopolitical competition between traditional powers and China will give PICs greater leverage in negotiating with these donors and the possibility to generate more aid from them. In the future, external players that can provide more support to PICs in the above priority areas may have an upper hand in expanding influence in the region.

Author notes

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Endnotes

1. Pacific leaders’ speeches can be found at the General Assembly of the UN website.
2. Cook Islands and Niue are the only non-UN members of the 14 PICs.

Reference