



Pacific Regionalism: Opportunities and Challenges

Denghua Zhang and Walter Diamana

DOI [10.25911/XCYT-0083](https://doi.org/10.25911/XCYT-0083)

22 November 2021

For five decades, Pacific Island countries have used regionalism as a main vehicle to promote development and security. This In Brief discusses some of the opportunities for Pacific regionalism, including geographical, demographic and resource features, previous achievements and shared concerns. It also examines challenges to Pacific regionalism, such as geostrategic competition, the Taiwan issue, the overlapping of regional organisations, over-reliance on regional organisations and the representation of subregional groups.

Opportunities

Many Pacific Island countries share similar geographical, demographic and resource features, including remoteness to international markets, small populations with a high proportion dispersed in rural areas and outer islands and a lack of natural resources, to name a few.¹ These shared factors make it natural for Pacific leaders to seek regional cooperation to help address development and security challenges, as they have done in the past. Regional initiatives have supported nation-building efforts throughout the Pacific.

Pacific regionalism has been boosted by notable achievements in the past decades. For example, the Pacific Islands Forum continues to be the most important regional political body; the University of the South Pacific educates a large number of graduates in the region; and the Secretariat of the Pacific Community remains the most important provider for science, technology and other technical disciplines. Another success story concerns the Parties to the Nauru Agreement, a locally created entity that elevated fisheries revenue for member countries from US\$64 million in 2010 to US\$501 million in 2018 (Aqorau 2019:129).

Shared concerns also unite Pacific Island countries in international settings. In their speeches at the 2021 United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), Pacific leaders raised common concerns, such as the impacts of climate change, ocean conservation and sustainable development, and the need to ensure Pacific maritime

zones and rights are not affected by sea-level rise.² Climate change is the best example of Pacific Island countries representing their joint concerns, with Pacific leaders reiterating their bottom line of a 1.5°C rise as a target for all nations in tackling global warming, calling for immediate action and emission cuts. In September 2020, Solomon Islands senior ambassador Robert Sisilo told the Australian federal parliament, ‘Lest we forget, climate change, not COVID-19, not even China, is the biggest threat to our security’.

In recognition of the gravity of new challenges and Pacific Island countries’ capacity and resource constraints, Pacific countries have committed to promoting regional cooperation. Thus, the Blue Pacific initiative and the Boe Declaration on Regional Security were adopted in 2017 and 2018 with Pacific countries vowing to take a collective approach to regional development and security underpinned by conservation, sustainable development and an inclusive concept of security. Pacific Islands Forum countries are also in the process of developing the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent.

Challenges

Geostrategic competition between traditional powers and China is occurring in the Pacific. In 2019, Dame Meg Taylor, then Secretary General of the Pacific Islands Forum, urged Pacific Island countries to deal with China and the geostrategic competition collectively, reminding them to think ‘as a collective rather than only considering bilateral gains’. However, driven by their own national interests, which do not always converge, individual Pacific Island countries have taken varied positions: the Federated States of Micronesia recently called for a détente and cooperation between external powers, especially the US and China; Palau and the Marshall Islands have thrown their support behind the US as it competes with China; and other countries such as Fiji and Solomon Islands are balancing their relations with both traditional powers and China. More broadly, as Pacific scholars Greg Fry and Sandra Tarte (2015) explain, there has been a paradigm shift from

the old Pacific diplomacy to a new Pacific diplomacy, with Pacific countries demonstrating confidence and passion in proactive diplomacy.

The China–Japan rivalry as part of the geostrategic competition is also intensifying in the Pacific. For example, China and Japan have been lobbying strongly for support from the region on the issue of UN Security Council reform, with China opposing Japan’s bid for permanent membership. In their addresses to the 2021 UNGA, countries such as Papua New Guinea, Marshall Islands, Samoa and Solomon Islands took a balanced strategy, calling for the advancement of UN Security Council reform and starting text-based negotiations while avoiding openly supporting Japan. In contrast, the Federated States of Micronesia explicitly backed Japan’s bid. Solomon Islands advocated for a Small Island Developing States-dedicated seat in an expanded council.

The Taiwan issue further divides the region. Taiwan’s remaining regional diplomatic partners — Palau, Marshall Islands, Nauru and Tuvalu — voiced firm support for Taiwan at the 2021 UNGA. Marshall Islands President David Kabua boasted the country’s ‘commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific, and [to] stand apart from any who would seek to have us trade our core values for easy inducement’, in a veiled reference to China. He also expressed concerns about human rights abuses in Xinjiang and the recent developments in Hong Kong. In contrast, the other 10 Pacific nations have reaffirmed their support of the ‘One China’ policy at bilateral meetings, such as the first China–Pacific foreign ministers’ meeting in October 2021.

Another challenge relates to the overlapping of regional organisations. The Council of Regional Organisations in the Pacific has nine regional agencies that, to some extent, replicate similar issues for the same member countries and territories. Annual contributions are at times an additional burden to member countries. The large number of regional organisations can also lead to competition for external funding, which could tie these organisations to the agenda of donors. As Collin Beck, Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs & External Trade in Solomon Islands, expressed, ‘We oversold the concept of regionalism, so much so that we have given a free pass to many potential partners who are now avoiding conducting genuine dialogue and cooperation with member states over their regional contribution’ (Beck 2020:15).

Relying too heavily on regional organisations may also weaken domestic institutions in Pacific countries. The psychological sense of having another institutional bureaucratic layer above domestic institutions can be demoralising, especially when the upper level sees themselves as more capable than the domestic layer. Over-dependence on regional organisations for political, economic and technical support can also

disincentivise member countries from strengthening their own institutions.

Furthermore, the divergent interests of subregional groups add to the complexity of Pacific regionalism. As an example, the five Micronesian countries (Palau, Marshall Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Nauru and Kiribati) are withdrawing from the Pacific Islands Forum to protest their candidate failing to be appointed the new Secretary General in February 2021, which to them breached the gentlemen’s agreement that it was Micronesia’s turn to fill the position. Although leaders such as Federated States of Micronesia President David Panuelo assure that their subregion will continue to work closely with the forum, the impact of this move on Pacific regionalism needs to be monitored at a time when the region is grappling with new challenges.

Conclusion

Pacific regionalism faces both opportunities and challenges. Separate analyses are needed on the capacity of Pacific regionalism to address these challenges. It may also be useful to draw on the lessons of other regional organisations such as the European Union and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations in driving regionalism.

Author notes

Denghua Zhang is a research fellow at ANU’s Department of Pacific Affairs. Walter Diamana is a diplomat from the Solomon Islands Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Endnotes

1. Exceptions include the large population of Papua New Guinea, which is estimated to be over nine million. Some Pacific Island countries have developed extractive resource industries, such as mining and logging in Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands.
2. Available at <https://gadebate.un.org/generaldebate76/en/>

References

- Aqorau, T. 2019. *Fishing for Success: Lessons in Pacific Regionalism*. Canberra: Department of Pacific Affairs, ANU.
- Beck, C. 2020. Geopolitics of the Pacific Islands: How Should the Pacific Islands States Advance Their Strategic and Security Interests? *Security Challenges* 16(1):11–16.
- Fry, G. and S. Tarte 2015. *The New Pacific Diplomacy*. Canberra: ANU Press.

The **Department of Pacific Affairs (DPA)** is the leading international centre for applied multidisciplinary research and analysis concerning contemporary state, society and governance in the Pacific. DPA acknowledges the Australian Government’s support for the production of the In Brief series. The views expressed in this paper are those of the author/s and do not necessarily reflect those of the ANU or the Australian Government. See the DPA website for a full disclaimer.