



The Proliferation of External Geographies in Oceania: ‘It is Nice to be Relevant’

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Oceania has become the subject of a proliferation of new policies towards it by external powers (Smith and Wesley-Smith 2021). The economic presence of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) is a leading factor in the development of these Pacific agendas, opening a new era of uncertain political and economic competition. The arrival of Beijing’s Belt and Road Initiative in the region has only heightened the strategic anxiety of the US, Australia and other powers. In 2012, and in response to several high-level diplomatic visits to Oceania, then president of Kiribati Anote Tong, remarked wryly, ‘It is nice to be relevant’ (Tong 2012). Given the wide range of Pacific initiatives proposed, his words were also prescient. Within the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), states in Oceania seek to not only diversify relations beyond former and current colonial powers, but also prioritise human security emergencies, such as the climate crisis.

Australia and New Zealand have announced a recommitment to Oceania after a period of perceived neglect. In 2017, Australia declared a ‘Pacific Step-up’ as part of a [white paper](#) on foreign policy. The Step-up, combined in 2019 with the Australian Infrastructure Financing Facility, aimed to ‘engage with the Pacific with greater intensity and ambition, deliver more integrated and innovative policy and make further, substantial long-term investments in the region’s development’. In 2018, then foreign minister Winston Peters announced New Zealand’s [Pacific Reset](#), which outlined five principles of understanding, friendship, mutual benefit, collective ambition, and sustainability to bring shared prosperity with states in Oceania. The Pacific Step-up and Pacific Reset policy documents both cite China’s increased political and economic presence as a rationale to elevate engagement.

The 2018 [US Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific](#), released in January 2021, outlined plans to keep the entire Pacific Islands region ‘aligned with the United States’. The US’ [Indo-Pacific strategy](#), primarily a defence policy, illustrates the entanglement of such geopolitical goals with geoeconomics. The strategy prioritises the maintenance of a US-led dominance over

a collective area covering two oceans. Moreover, a 2019 US Department of Defense report not only outlines the US’ historical claim to a Indo-Pacific presence, but also its leadership in ensuring a networked space upholding ‘the international rules-based order’ (US Department of Defense 2019:5). There is no ambivalence in naming the foremost challenge to this order, with the document singling out the ‘China threat’ and recommending enhanced security efforts between allied nations to ensure a ‘free’ and ‘open’ region. In a more directed approach toward Oceania, the US initiated the [Pacific Pledge](#) of the Indo-Pacific Strategy in October 2019. The subsequent focus on pandemic recovery and the economy, again, appear to compete with the availability of Chinese state capital and iterative donations of personal protective equipment and COVID-19 vaccines. Further, in reterritorialising two ocean spaces into one area of strategic interest, the US envisions economic benefits through ‘free, fair, and reciprocal trade based on open investment, transparent agreements, and connectivity’ (ibid.:4). The Indo-Pacific concept has generated new arrangements aimed at containment of China, such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the Quad) comprising the US, Australia, India, and Japan, each with their own Indo-Pacific policies.¹

With more modest efforts, other external states are (re)engaging with Oceania. Formerly an extensive colonial power in the region, the UK, now reduced to the Pitcairn Islands, announced a [Pacific Uplift](#) in 2019. In July of the same year, Laura Clarke, British High Commissioner to New Zealand, admitted ‘quite frankly we stepped back too much from our Pacific friends and partners’ (Clarke 2019). Although prompted by the UK’s rush to rekindle partnerships in anticipation of its January 2020 exit from the European Union (EU), the Pacific Uplift remained limited to opening diplomatic missions in Samoa, Tonga and Vanuatu, as well as a loose commitment to the ‘shared value’ of ‘trade as a common good — as a driver of both prosperity and peace and stability’ (ibid.). By 2021, the Pacific Uplift, limited as it had been, all but disappeared from Whitehall policy rhetoric.

The Republic of China, or Taiwan, implemented a [New Southbound Policy](#) in 2016, which targets Australia and New Zealand, among states in Asia, as alternative economic partners to the PRC. Taiwan also reestablished the Austronesian Forum in 2018 — this forum of 13 members² promotes a shared identity with Pacific Islanders through an Austronesian ethnicity built on links between Taiwan's indigenous population and the Pacific through historic migrations across the Pacific Ocean. The forum seeks to enhance 'the value of cultural sustainability, democracy, good governance, human rights and sustainable development through close cooperation' (Austronesian Forum 2018). Taiwan's deployment of shared identities and histories is mirrored elsewhere; the Pacific Reset literature describes New Zealand as a Pacific country, the Indo-Pacific Strategy explains the US has given 'blood and treasure to sustain the freedoms, openness, and opportunity of this region' and the UK High Commissioner to New Zealand notes 'the UK has long been in and of the Pacific' (US Department of Defense 2019:2; Clarke 2019).

States across Asia have included Oceania in the rewiring of their economic connectivity. South Korea's 'New Southern Policy', Indonesia's 'Pacific Elevation', and India's 'Act East' are examples. Despite a focus on ASEAN states and India, South Korea's policy has been integrated into climate adaptation assistance in Oceania through the US–ROK [Indo-Pacific Strategy–New Southern Policy Dialogue](#). Indonesia's outreach is undercut in many Pacific societies due to its ongoing occupation of West Papua. However, this did not stop Indonesia's foreign minister laying claim to a Pacific identity in a [July 2019 speech](#) at the Jakarta-organised Pacific Exposition. Through the platform of the Indonesia-South Pacific Forum, talk of preferential trade agreements with PNG and Fiji lingered, yet Kabutaulaka (2020) has skeptically observed that the Pacific Elevation is a quid pro quo of enhanced trade for turning a blind eye on West Papua. India's transnational vision of Act East had its origins in earlier 'Look East' policies. Act East began with states in East and Southeast Asia and turned to include Oceania as India became strategically attached to the spatial narratives of the Indo-Pacific. The Forum for India–Pacific Islands Cooperation, held for the first time in 2014 and then in 2015, were the most visible expressions of Act East in Oceania. While Japan favours multilateral engagement through the triennial and assistance-focused Pacific Islands Leaders Meeting (PALM) summits, Oceania has become integrated into Tokyo's policy of a free and open Indo-Pacific.

In 2017, through the PIF, political leaders in Oceania endorsed the [Blue Pacific](#) strategy 'to re-capture the collective potential of the region's shared stewardship of the Pacific Ocean'. While essentially a restatement of the shared identity endorsed in the 2014 Framework for Pacific Regionalism, the Blue Pacific also upheld

the framework's agenda of 'sustainable development, economic growth, strengthened systems, and security for all'. Unsurprisingly, given the emergence of several external agendas, the Blue Pacific aims to prioritise the welfare of Pacific peoples. The Forum's 2018 [Boe Declaration](#) emphasised human security, particularly the climate crisis. Discourses about the China threat emanating from Washington, Canberra and elsewhere have accrued only passing interest in the region given the existential threat of rising sea levels and the preference to keep power politics out of the region. The Indo-Pacific and China-focused AUKUS security pact between Australia, the UK and the US, announced in September 2021, has only strengthened regional concern about militarisation of Oceania. Australia's potential acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines, as Pacific Islanders continue to manage the trauma of American, British and French nuclear testing, is [not well received](#). It appears that external powers believe only they can define Oceania's new relevance.

Author notes

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Endnotes

1. [India and Japan](#) have individual Indo-Pacific policies. Other such policies include those of [ASEAN](#), [the EU](#), [France](#), [Germany](#), [the Netherlands](#) and [the UK](#).
2. Taiwan, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Solomon Islands, Nauru, Tuvalu, Palau, New Zealand, Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, Guam and Hawai'i. In 2019, Kiribati and Solomon Islands switched diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to the PRC.

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