



The Proposed Withdrawal of Micronesia from the PIF: One Year Later

Gonzaga Puas

DOI: [10.25911/6Z6Z-P138](https://doi.org/10.25911/6Z6Z-P138)

25 March 2022

This In Brief reviews events of the past year, after the five members of the Micronesian President's Summit (MPS) — Palau, Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), Nauru, Marshall Islands and Kiribati — indicated their intention to withdraw from the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), as well as the recent announcement that they are reconsidering retaining their membership in the Forum following dialogue between the MPS, the PIF chair and key PIF leaders. If the MPS states withdraw from the PIF their involvement will cease, raising concerns over regional cooperation and security in the Pacific. In 2023–24, these same nations are due to participate in a review of their respective Compacts of Free Association with the United States (US), which includes security in the northern Pacific. The events of the last year reveal that in an environment of sometimes fragile regional relationships in the Pacific, MPS states are contemplating the benefits of subregional unity and international opportunities.

Recent developments

On 11 February 2022, [an official note](#) from the FSM Department of Foreign Affairs announced the FSM's intention to rescind its position to withdraw its membership from the PIF. This was to allow for specific substantive reforms of the PIF leadership to 'materialize' by June 2022. The announcement came after discussions with the other Micronesian leaders in a virtual summit in 2021 and after extensive discussion with other PIF leaders. One of the measures remains that the current secretary general should be replaced by the joint Micronesian candidate, Gerald Zackios. If these requirements are not met, then the northern nations of the Pacific have said they will withdraw permanently. As President Panuelo stated, 'if the reforms including a change in PIF's leadership does not happen, the FSM and Micronesian countries would leave the Forum' (Radio Australia 14/2/2022). President Whipples of Palau [confirmed](#) Panuelo's comments by stating that the Micronesian community wants the PIF to resolve the issue as soon as possible, as the Micronesian people no longer want to be taken for granted.

The Micronesian stance

In February 2021, the MPS states decided to withdraw their memberships from the PIF. This was after their candidate was not successful in securing the position of secretary general. The loss confirmed the Micronesian members' suspicion that their subregion continues to be sidelined by the PIF. Australia was [blamed](#) for the loss, and it was speculated at that time that such a defeat would not have happened [if the US had been a member](#) of PIF. In response, Palau withdrew from the PIF and closed its embassy in Fiji in protest. FSM President, David Panuelo also followed suit, honouring the spirit of Micronesian solidarity, but stopped short of closing its embassy in Fiji.

Many prominent observers understood why the MPS states wanted to withdraw, but at the same time cautioned against such withdrawal from the PIF. They claimed it was not in the best interests of the nations and that the decision was made in the heat of the moment and long-term consequences were not considered. For example, the seventh president of the FSM, [Emanuel Mori](#), and James Movick, a veteran of many Pacific regional organisations, opposed the decision. They argued that the PIF represents the collective voice of the Pacific region in engaging with the world about essential matters affecting the region such as climate change and regional stability. They stressed that a divided Pacific weakens Pacific Islanders' voices in international forums. As Mori commented, it was not a wise decision for the 'Micronesians to withdraw into their corners of the Pacific Ocean and try to find a way forward alone' (Carreon 17/2/2021). Similarly, Movick also expressed his disappointment by commenting that FSM's quest for international recognition relies on the Forum's support.¹

If the PIF cannot resolve the Micronesian issue, it could lead to further political dissonance in the wider Pacific. The fallout of such could create antagonistic tendencies between the three subregions as they each focus on their own interests and less on group cooperation. However, at this stage a window of

opportunity remains open for the MPS states to remain in the PIF. Should the northern Pacific nations follow the current pathway and leave the PIF permanently, then the consequences could be felt in future years in terms of competing regional interests. This may be counterproductive if the goal is to develop strong allegiances throughout the Pacific region.

Impact on security arrangements

It has been put forward that the US could strengthen its influence in the northern Pacific by entering into Compacts of Free Association with Nauru, Kiribati and Tuvalu (Gray and Paskal 17/12/2021). This would enable the Micronesian nations to retreat into their own region and make decisions based on the interests of their subregion. The Micronesians permanently leaving the PIF raises the potential issue of a significant reduction in the level of security cooperation between the north and the south Pacific. Additionally, Micronesian leaders have been working on establishing a trading bloc, so that more international organisations can have a presence in the northern Pacific (Gallen 2015:186). Discussion at the 20th MPS indicates that the Micronesian states are looking at widening their engagement internationally rather than looking south of the equator, when it comes to all types of security matters (economic, transnational crime and the impacts of climate change, for example).

The most encompassing Pacific organisation focused on regional security and politics is the PIF (Wallis et al. 2021:2). Micronesian non-membership would mean not being part of the PIF's initiative, the '2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent', and the Boe Declaration's 'expanded concept of security', including a united approach to combat the impacts of climate change. Although the 2018 Boe Declaration is a security creation inclusive of all PIF member nations, each island nation is assessing the tangible benefits for them that will flow from the declaration. In the case of the Micronesian Compact nations, security measures such as in defence, environmental security and EEZ (exclusive economic zone) protection are at present provided by the US. They are currently looking to the next step in the Compact arrangements post-2023 (2024 for Palau), when the Compact terms – specifically, the financial arrangements – are set to lapse unless extended.

During his 12 February trip to Fiji this year, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken attended a dialogue with Pacific Island leaders. Shortly afterwards in a media event, he renewed US commitment to the region: 'what happens here [in the Pacific Islands] matters to the United States' (US Department of State 12/2/2022). As Gray and Paskal proposed recently, the US needs to reassess 'subcontracting its foreign policy for many Pacific islands to Australia and New Zealand' (Gray and Paskal 17/12/2021). Despite key differences with

the US stance on such concerns as climate and nuclear contamination, the Compact nations generally align their foreign policy in support of the US position and value themselves as an important part of the Pacific security umbrella. However, within the MPS, nuanced variations in the level of commitment to the US exist, as do contrasting foreign policy positions on diplomatic ties with the Peoples Republic of China (PRC) and Taiwan; for instance, with FSM and Kiribati retaining diplomatic ties with PRC.

Conclusion

The PIF leadership controversy reveals that the Pacific is a dynamic region where each island nation has its own interests that play into subregional politics, which in turn play out in regional bodies such as the PIF. Even if the MPS states retain their strong connections to the rest of the Pacific and remain in the PIF, the Micronesian outlook and context will drive efforts to broaden engagement beyond automatically looking south.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to the anonymous reviewers for their contribution to the text.

Author notes

Gonzaga Puas is a research fellow at the ANU Department of Pacific Affairs.

Endnote

1. James Movick 5/3/2021. Director of the Pacific Fusion Centre, personal communication.

References

- Carreon, B. 17/2/2021. Pacific Statesman Urges Micronesia Rethink on Forum Exit.
- Gallen, S.L. 2015. Micronesia Sub-regional Diplomacy. In G. Fry and S. Tarte (eds). *The New Pacific Diplomacy*. Canberra: ANU Press, 175–88.
- Gray, A.B. and C. Paskal 17/12/2021. The Solomon Islands Crisis Shows America Needs a New Pacific Strategy. The Diplomat.
- Radio Australia 14/2/2022. Micronesian Leaders Expect Forum Secretary General to Step Down by June. Prianka Srinivasan on *Pacific Beat* program.
- US Department of State 12/2/2022. Secretary Antony J. Blinken and Acting Fijian Prime Minister Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum at a Joint Press Availability. Press Release.
- Wallis, J., H. McNeill, J. Batley and A. Powles 2021. Mapping Security Cooperation in the Pacific Islands. DPA Research Report. Canberra: ANU.

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.