



Mirroring Our Struggles: Nuclear Legacies in Oceania and Central Asia

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Semey, in eastern Kazakhstan, is approximately 2,800 kilometres from the nearest ocean. It sits on the West Siberian Plain, and the temperatures in January average around -15 degrees Celsius. Downstream from Semey, along the Irtysh River, which cuts through the city, the plains give way to an arid steppe landscape of grasses and shrubs. The population of Semey is approximately 350,000 and majority Kazakh — a Turkic and predominantly Muslim people — with a significant minority of Russians. A former resident is 19th century novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky.

There's little to suggest a connection with the Pacific Ocean, except that Semey, formerly known as Semipalatinsk, was the site of 456 nuclear tests between 1949 and 1989. This nuclear legacy links Kazakhs to I-Kiribati, Mā'ohi Nui, and Marshallese, whose homelands and oceanscapes the United Kingdom, France, and the United States (US) considered similarly 'remote' for the purpose of weapons testing. The unaddressed legacy of testing in Oceania and Central Asia has given way to strong antinuclear movements in both regions — often led by younger persons — seeking colonial states to remediate harmful environmental and health outcomes.

This In Brief outlines the bilateral relations between states in Oceania and Central Asia, then moves on to the shared histories of nuclear testing. Lastly, I examine civil society responses in both regions, their alliances, and the broader impact of these connections.

Central Asian states — understood here as Afghanistan and Azerbaijan along with the five former Soviet 'stans' of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan — maintain a range of bilateral relations with Pacific Island countries (PICs). Fiji is the only state in Oceania that has diplomatic relations with all seven Central Asian states. All other PICs, except Papua New Guinea (PNG) and Cook Islands, have diplomatic ties with between three and five Central Asian states. Cook Islands established its only diplomatic relationship with a Central Asian state, Azerbaijan, in April 2025, as part of efforts to expand its global reach. Also in 2025, Uzbekistan formalised relations with Nauru, its second partner in Oceania, citing efforts towards 'cooperation in political, trade-economic and cultural-humanitarian areas' (Gazeta.uz 23/3/2025).

Only three states in Oceania do not have ties to Kazakhstan, which is by far the largest economy in Central Asia, given its vast natural resources. However,

trade between Oceania and Central Asia is miniscule. For example, in 2023, exports from PNG — which is the largest economy in Oceania and also natural resource rich — to Kazakhstan totalled just over US\$2,000, all of it coffee, and imports from Kazakhstan to PNG totalled approximately US\$14,000. In 2019, the Fijian government noted that 'cooperation between Fiji and Kazakhstan is expected to soar to greater heights in the areas of trade, tourism and economic development' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 11/9/2019). However, by 2023, the value of exports to Kazakhstan had stalled at US\$8,500.

Azeri support for the Kanaky and Te Ao Maohi decolonisation movements in New Caledonia and French Polynesia, through the establishment of the Baku Initiative Group, has gained more prominence in the past two years. Founded in 2023, likely as a response to French support for Azerbaijan's neighbour Armenia in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the group includes representatives from French colonies and territories in Oceania, the Caribbean, the Indian Ocean, and Europe (*The Guardian* 17/5/2024). The Macron government has accused Azerbaijan of orchestrating a disinformation campaign in New Caledonia (Kanak), particularly over the police response to unrest in May 2024. During the protests, demonstrators carried Azeri flags, but Azerbaijan denied any involvement in the events.

Furthermore, Central Asian states have moved to strengthen their climate credentials through diplomacy and aid to PICs. In November 2024, the United Nations climate summit COP29 was held in Baku, and six months before this, Azeri officials hosted leaders from Tonga and Tuvalu in preparation for the conference. However, a month in advance of COP29, Tongan climate activist Joseph Zane Sikulu criticised the expansion of Azerbaijan's fossil fuel industry, calling President Ilham Aliyev's proposed, and eventually scrapped, climate fund 'greenwashing' (Sikulu 2/9/2024). Likewise, in October 2015, Kazakhstan, a leading oil and gas producer, donated US\$678,000 to fund a project titled 'Supporting the Pacific Voice on Climate Change and renewable energy solutions' to strengthen Oceania's participation at COP21 in Paris, as well as to support the development of national strategies for climate resilience.

While Central Asian government support to Oceania in tackling climate change appears performative, a legacy of nuclear testing substantively connects the two regions. France, the United Kingdom, and the US conducted 318 tests in total, including atmospheric tests,

in the Pacific region between 1946 and 1996; most of the tests occurred at sites in French Polynesia (Te Ao Maohi), Kiribati, and Marshall Islands. Fallout was detected in Cook Islands, Fiji, New Zealand Aotearoa, Niue, Samoa, Tokelau, Tonga, and Tuvalu. Overall, between 1961 and 1989, the Soviet Union conducted 116 atmospheric tests and 340 underground tests in Kazakhstan. Although this paper covers Central Asian states, given the wide impact of fallout, it is relevant to note that China conducted 45 nuclear tests, 23 of them atmospheric, across the Kazakh border in Xinjiang between 1964 and 1996.

The devastating legacies of these nuclear tests are well documented. Among the people of French Polynesia (Te Ao Maohi), Kazakhstan, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, and Xinjiang, researchers have linked increased rates of cancer, congenital malformations, cardiovascular disease, anemia, and genetic disorders to nuclear testing. The displacement of entire communities and loss of indigenous knowledge is an ongoing trauma for the peoples of Oceania and Central Asia, due to the long-term environmental impacts of radioactive contamination, desertification, and reduced biodiversity. These catastrophic health and environmental outcomes connect Oceania and Central Asia; however, another common bond between Kazakhs, I-Kiribati, Mā'ohi Nui, Marshallese, and Uyghurs is that these tests occurred at time when their nations were colonised or captive, leaving disenfranchised people to bear the costs of external power militarisation.

Governments across Oceania and Central Asia have sought to address nuclear legacies. The Treaty of Rarotonga, which came into force in 1986, created the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone, prohibiting the testing and possession of nuclear weapons. In 2017, under President Hilda Heine, Marshall Islands established the National Nuclear Commission to seek justice, including compensation, for the negative health and environmental outcomes of US nuclear testing. Kazakh victims of nuclear testing have found the governments of Soviet successor states Kazakhstan and Russia unwilling to provide adequate, or any, recognition and compensation for their plight. Nevertheless, Kazakhstan denuclearised by 1995 and has committed to numerous non-proliferation initiatives, including the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons in 1993.

Civil society has been largely responsible for connecting the nuclear legacies of Oceania and Central Asia. In both regions, several activist groups exist, such as Youngsolwara Pacific, Marshallese Youth for Nuclear

Justice, and Pacific Network on Globalisation in Oceania; and Steppe Organization for Peace (STOP), Qazaq Nuclear Frontline Coalition (QNFC), and Committee Polygon 21 in Kazakhstan. In 2024, at the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation forum, 'From the Pacific to the Steppes: Addressing the Nuclear Sins of the Past and Advancing Justice,' Pacific Islanders and Kazakhs met to share testimonies and map future collaboration. A year later, at a side event during the third meeting of states that are parties to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, a film by QNFC co-founder Aigerim Seitenova titled *Jara* [A Wound] was screened. The documentary detailed the gendered impacts of Soviet testing in Kazakhstan. In her reaction to the film, Danity Laukon, a nuclear justice activist from Marshall Islands, said, 'Sickness, cancer, fighting, radiation — these words are not unfamiliar to me. In the Marshall Islands, we endured 67 nuclear and thermonuclear tests from the U.S. nuclear testing program. Many of the experiences of these women from Kazakhstan mirror the struggles of our own women' (Abuova 11/3/2025).

The limited diplomatic and economic relations between Oceania and Central Asia belie a connection between the peoples of the two regions; that is, the pursuit of justice for the human and environmental impacts of nuclear testing. Power rivalry and ideological division led to the choice of these two regions as the sites for most nuclear tests conducted worldwide. Activism to address nuclear legacies has built a global network that flows through what may seem the most unlikely of places.

Author notes

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