



Competing Regional Visions and Incompatible Priorities: The Blue Pacific and Indo-Pacific in the Age of AUKUS

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Introduction

As two distinct visions of regional order and identity, the Blue Pacific and Indo-Pacific have been pursued with increasing vigour over the last five years. On the one hand, the Blue Pacific is championed by Pacific Island leaders as a framework for Pacific Islands regionalism founded on shared values, a common Oceanian identity and a commitment to collective action (PIFS 2022). Its insistence on Pacific self-determination has seen the Blue Pacific described as a strategy and narrative for assertive diplomacy that resists attempts to draw the Pacific Islands region into intensifying geopolitical power struggles between China and the United States and instead positions the Pacific as independent in its navigation of global politics (Kabutaulaka 2021). The Indo-Pacific, on the other hand, emerges as a product of these geopolitical power struggles. It projects a vision of democratic regional order stretching across the vast expanse of the Indian and Pacific Oceans and provides a policy platform for security collaboration between its member nations to advance such ambition. Promoted by the US and its allies, this second regional mapping seeks to counter China's growing presence across this extended maritime region and secure what is commonly referred to as a 'free and open Indo-Pacific' (Biden et al. 14/3/2023).

Despite their differences, the Blue Pacific and Indo-Pacific both describe regional visions that encompass, at least in part, the Pacific Ocean. This evokes questions about the relationship between these regional constructs: are they compatible, competing or something else altogether? Debates over such matters have animated policymakers and academics in recent years, particularly in Australia, where the nation holds formal ties to both visions: to the Blue Pacific through its membership of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), and the Indo-Pacific through its strategic alliance with the US and recent defence and foreign policies (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2017). This Discussion Paper steps into this debate, considering the impact that the recent Australia-United Kingdom-United States trilateral security partnership (AUKUS) has on the relationship between Blue Pacific and Indo-Pacific visions.

I contend that the advancement of AUKUS, the centrepiece of the Indo-Pacific strategy, exposes significant tensions between Blue Pacific and Indo-Pacific visions and, perhaps more concerning, that the Indo-Pacific construct threatens to undermine the core values and priorities of the Blue Pacific. This is grounded in an observation that AUKUS further entrenches the Indo-Pacific's vision of the Pacific Islands region as a theatre of great power struggle, and in doing so, undercuts the Blue Pacific's commitment to geopolitical independence and self-determination (PIF 2018). As such, AUKUS appears to confirm suggestions, largely voiced by Pacific Island leaders and communities, of the incompatibility between Blue Pacific and Indo-Pacific visions, opposed as they are by seemingly irreconcilable priorities.

Two regional visions: Blue Pacific and Indo-Pacific

Rooted in a mid-20th century idea of collective diplomacy, the Blue Pacific provides both a narrative and strategy for Pacific regionalism (Kabutaulaka 2021). The vision was first endorsed by PIF leaders at their 2017 meeting in Apia, Samoa, as a commitment to a new era of 'inspired' regional leadership and collective action as one 'Blue Continent' (PIF 2017:3). It centres the Pacific Ocean as the basis for regional identity and cooperation, drawing on deep histories of migration, trade, custodianship and kinship that have long connected Pacific Islands communities across their ocean (PIFS 5/9/2017:2; Taylor 2023).

Appeals to shared identity as the basis for regional solidarity and self-determination are not new in the Pacific. From the 'Pacific Way' developed during the early days of Pacific independence (Mara 1997; McNeill and Koro 11/7/2022; Tupouniua et al. 1975), to Albert Wendt and then Epeli Hau'ofa's advocacy for the reframing (and reclaiming) of the region as Oceania (Hau'ofa 1994; Wendt 1982) — which have subsequently been adopted into key regional policies (for example, the Framework for a Pacific Oceanscape (2010) and 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent (2022)) — regional representatives have long been invested in progressing collective, Pacific-led models of regionalism that resist the agendas of foreign (neo)

colonial powers and assert visions for Pacific self-determination. This is to say that the Blue Pacific is not a new expression of assertive Pacific regionalism, but a framing that builds on a rich legacy of thought, debate and advocacy (Fry and Tarte 2015).

More than a simple rebranding of existing Pacific regionalism constructs for audiences of the 21st century, the Blue Pacific is heavily shaped by contemporary geopolitics (Salesa 1/1/2024). As described by one of the vision's chief architects, former PIFS secretary general Dame Meg Taylor, the Blue Pacific was developed with acute awareness of the growing tensions between China and democratic global powers, namely the US and its allies (Taylor 8/2/2019). Concerned by how foreign geopolitical tensions were playing out across the region — through increased military activity, ballooning aid and infrastructure investment, and a scramble for bilateral security partnership agreements — Pacific leaders have crafted the Blue Pacific as a staunchly independent and Pacific-centred approach to regionalism and foreign relations. The Blue Pacific asserts its own cartography of the region that is distinct from both China's Belt and Road Initiative and the US-supported Indo-Pacific (Kabutaulaka 2021). This regional mapping centres Pacific communities and their interests, not the geostrategic calculations of foreign powers. As such, it provides a platform for regional solidarity that is mobilised by Pacific leaders in the interests of Pacific communities and upon a foundation of Pacific values. It is, in the deepest sense, a construct of Pacific regionalism.

Advancing a distinctly different vision of the Pacific region, the Indo-Pacific narrative is a geostrategic construct promoted by the US and its allies to describe a vast region covering the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Rising to popularity in the last five years, the term reimagines the map of Asia; replacing the once mainstream descriptor 'Asia-Pacific' and expanding this grouping to capture a maritime 'super-region' (Medcalf 2015) that stretches from the west coast of the US to the east coast of Africa. Far from an apolitical exercise, this remapping is motivated by geopolitical and geostrategic calculations: namely, an attempt by the US and its allies to counter China's growing international presence through the projection of combined naval power and strategic cooperation. That is to say that the Indo-Pacific creates a regional grouping that brings together distant maritime democracies in an effort to legitimise their strategic cooperation across a vast spatial construct. Through this geostrategic mapping, the US and its allies seek to shape a regional order favourable to their interests and values (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2017:27) and deter the further expansion of China's geopolitical influence. As such, the Indo-Pacific can be seen as a cartographic expression of both strategic denial (targeted at China) and regional (democratic) order building.

In support of this new geostrategic mapping, the US and its allies have embarked on an expansive rollout of Indo-Pacific programs and policies. These stretch across a range of policy sectors from economy (e.g. the US-led Indo-Pacific Economic Framework

for Prosperity), to health (e.g. Australia's Indo-Pacific Centre for Health Security), and environment (e.g. India's Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative). The primary focus of the overarching Indo-Pacific agenda, however, is defence. Australia coordinates the Indo-Pacific Endeavour, the United Kingdom has adopted a 'Defence tilt to the Indo-Pacific' (Cleverly 29/9/2022) based on its 2021 Integrated Review of the nation's security, defence, development and foreign policy (UK Cabinet Office 2021) and, as early as 2018, the US renamed its combatant command agency based in Hawai'i from 'Pacific Command' to 'Indo-Pacific Command'. Of all these operations, it is the AUKUS partnership that sits as the centrepiece of the Indo-Pacific order.

Debates on the relationship between Blue Pacific and Indo-Pacific

Since 2017, both Blue Pacific and Indo-Pacific constructs have existed as simultaneous, yet distinct (Salesa 1/1/2024; Tarte 2021), mappings of the Pacific Ocean region. This has given rise to debates on the compatibility between these two visions: 'should they be seen as visions in opposition to one another, as simply inconsistent with each other, or even as potentially compatible with each other?' (Wallis and Batley 2020:3). These debates are a central focus of this article.

Complementarity?

Somewhat unsurprisingly, the US government and its allies have insisted that the Blue Pacific and Indo-Pacific hold a relatively untroubled relationship of complementarity. One need look no further than the recently announced Partners in the Blue Pacific (PBP) Initiative for an illustration of this, with all PBP members also strong advocates of the Indo-Pacific construct. For these representatives, common commitments to a peaceful, prosperous and stable Pacific in both Blue Pacific and Indo-Pacific visions are seen as sufficient grounds for their mutuality. After all, both visions advocate for the protection of a democratic regional order and the aversion of war or other such conflict arising from geopolitical rivalry (Wong 17/4/2023). Such insistence on complementarity, however, downplays some of the very real differences in priorities between the Blue Pacific and Indo-Pacific, such as the former's advocacy for a broad security agenda (prioritising climate security) in contrast to the latter's more traditional (militarised) approach.

For Blue Pacific and Indo-Pacific visions to operate in complementarity, a second group of commentators has noted that metropolitan powers need to better recognise and respect Pacific Islands concerns when crafting their geostrategic agendas (Keen and Ivarature 2022; Morgan 2020; Tarte 2023). Unlike the previous group, these commentators recognise that the Blue Pacific and Indo-Pacific hold differing priorities and understandings of security and make no attempt to collapse them. Instead, they seek to find grounds for potential complementarity and identify areas of action that, if addressed, could better harmonise the two distinct cartographies.

Perhaps the most commonly cited area for improvement raised by these commentators is the strengthening of dialogue between Pacific and metropolitan powers, including proactive efforts to consult with Pacific leaders on matters of security (Ivarature 2021; Keen and Ivarature 2022; Morgan 2020; Tarte 2023). Respect for the security concerns of Pacific communities is considered to be of critical importance if the Indo-Pacific is to be positioned as a complementary agenda to the Blue Pacific, not its competitor. This requires Indo-Pacific advocates to recognise and address climate change as a primary security threat to the region (consistent with the Boe Declaration on Regional Security (2018)) and, perhaps more challengingly, to show regard for the Pacific's longstanding 'friends to all' posture (Pratt 2019). The significance of this recalibration to the Indo-Pacific vision is not lost on the commentators of this second grouping. However, without such adjustment, it is argued that 'the Indo-Pacific concept creates a sense of insecurity for PICs' (Ivarature 2021). Here complementarity is understood as something that must be negotiated, not simply asserted or assumed.

Competing cartographies?

On a visit to Australia in 2018, the then Samoan prime minister, Tuila'epa Malielegaoi, presented a speech at the Lowy Institute on 'Pacific perspectives on the new geostrategic landscape'. As one of the champions of the newly developed Blue Pacific narrative, Tuila'epa expressed clear concern over the vigour with which the US and its allies were pursuing the Indo-Pacific strategy to the seeming marginalisation of Pacific interests and voices; stating in no uncertain terms: 'For the Pacific there is a real risk of privileging "Indo" over the "Pacific"' (Malielegaoi 30/8/2018). Less than five years later, his successor, Prime Minister Fiamē Mata'afa, provided a lecture at the Lowy Institute and confirmed Tuila'epa's fears:

We are faced with the complexities of varying versions of the Indo-Pacific strategies[:] the resultant partnerships that have emerged from the diversity of networks and alliances, as well as the underlying lack of understanding of the Pacific countries of how and when the two large ocean spaces morphed into the Indo-Pacific, and the rationale behind the concept. Why? Because this is the basis of the geostrategic approaches of the development partners working in the region. I feel I need to be very frank, and to say to this gathering tonight, that in the Pacific, we feel our partners have fallen short of acknowledging the integrity of Pacific leadership ... (Mata'afa 22/3/2023)

These remarks from Pacific leaders on Australian soil and to Australian audiences expose their deep unease with the operation of the Indo-Pacific mapping, and a desire to make such discomfort known. As their comments imply, these leaders suggest that the Blue Pacific — an articulation of Pacific peoples, voices, and

concerns — is being overlooked by Australia, the US, and their allies in their pursuit of geostrategic influence.

Hon. Tuila'epa and Hon. Fiamē are not alone in their scepticism of the Indo-Pacific, with leaders across Pacific civil society and academia similarly characterising this vision as in tension with, if not a threat to, the Blue Pacific (Kabutaulaka 2021; Penjueli 2023; Taylor 2023). These commentators give voice to Pacific perspectives on the relationship between the Blue Pacific and Indo-Pacific, offering insight into how these cartographies are viewed by communities of (and for) the Pacific Islands region. They posit that the Blue Pacific and Indo-Pacific operate antagonistically, confronting suggestions that they could harmoniously coexist in complementarity. Attending to these perspectives is necessary for de-centring the perspectives of the Indo-Pacific's metropolitan core (Canberra, Washington, London).

Such commentaries contribute to a rich body of countermapping literature that has developed with respect to the Pacific over the decades. As noted earlier, Albert Wendt's (1982) and Epeli Hau'ofa's (1994) reclamation of Oceania as a vision for an expansive, expanding region of large ocean states marked an early intervention into colonially conceived imaginings of the Pacific. Similar work has been continued by Pacific (Kabutaulaka 2015, 2021; Koro et al. 2023) and non-Pacific (Douglas 2010; Eckstein and Schwarz 2019; Jolly 2007) scholars alike, all working to expose and challenge the politics underlying cartographic imaginings of the Pacific region. This is the terrain of debate that commentaries on the Blue Pacific and Indo-Pacific tread today, with the Blue Pacific representing a Pacific-led countermapping exercise independent of external constructions of the region; the Indo-Pacific foremost among them.

So, what of AUKUS and its implications on the relationship between Blue Pacific and Indo-Pacific visions? And perhaps more broadly, its consequence for Pacific regionalism?

AUKUS: The Indo-Pacific centrepiece that threatens the Blue Pacific

On 16 September 2021, leaders of the US, Australia and the UK unveiled the centrepiece of the Indo-Pacific vision: the AUKUS partnership. An acronym of Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, AUKUS represents an extensive trilateral security partnership focused on strengthening and integrating defence capabilities for the purpose of 'sustain[ing] peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region' (The White House 15/9/2021). Its flagship initiative is the AUKUS Nuclear-Powered Submarine Pathway (Pillar 1) which will see Australia acquire a nuclear-powered submarine fleet comprised of three US-built Virginia Class nuclear-powered attack submarines (SSNs) and eight Australian-built SSN-AUKUS, the latter of which will incorporate technologies from both the US and the UK. When complete, this will constitute the first time the Australian military has owned and operated nuclear-powered submarines.

Although the AUKUS submarine program proposes to advance ‘interoperability, commonality, and mutual benefit’ among its Indo-Pacific partners (The White House 15/9/2021), concerns have been raised by Pacific Island communities about the risk that an Australia-based nuclear-powered submarine fleet presents for their Blue Pacific security and values (Blades 17/9/2021; Brennan 18/4/2023; Middleby et al. 4/11/2021; PEV 16/4/2023). These concerns include (a) lack of consultation on AUKUS, (b) the threat of militarisation of the region, and (c) prioritisation of military investment over funding for climate action. These concerns reveal seemingly irreconcilable tensions between Blue Pacific and Indo-Pacific understandings of regional security and confirm suggestions that the Indo-Pacific may pose a direct threat to the Blue Pacific.

Lack of consultation

Despite the significance of the multi-billion dollar, broad-ranging AUKUS partnership, the announcement of this trilateral security alliance came as a surprise to many leaders and governments across the globe,¹ including those of the Pacific Islands. Speaking to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation two weeks after the announcement, Kiribati President Taneti Maamau expressed his frustration at Australia’s lack of consultation with regional governments on the program, stating that ‘as small island states, we thought we were part of the solution ... we are in the Pacific family. We should be consulted’ (Grant 28/9/2021). He was not alone in his anger (Brennan 18/4/2023). Sources have revealed that no Pacific Islands or South-East Asian leaders were consulted on AUKUS ahead of its announcement (Blades 17/9/2021; Middleby et al. 4/11/2021; Radio New Zealand 21/3/2023), effectively leaving both regions to which Australia is closely related (Asia and the Pacific) in the dark about the arrangement. Indeed, according to Solomon Islands Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare, it was only through subsequent media coverage of the AUKUS deal that his government came to learn of the arrangement (SBS 29/4/2022).

Australia’s failure to notify, let alone consult, its global counterparts on AUKUS struck a particularly sore nerve in the Pacific given Australia’s membership of the ‘Pacific family’, AUKUS’s operation across the Pacific Islands region and the region’s longstanding antinuclear position (clearly articulated in the 1985 South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty (Treaty of Rarotonga)). Put plainly, it confirmed the fears of Tuila’epa of a privileging of the ‘Indo’ over the ‘Pacific’ (Malielegaoi 30/8/2018). In recent years, AUKUS partners appear to have invested greater effort in briefing Pacific Island leaders on the program (Mata’afa 22/3/2023; Tillett 14/3/2023); however, the extent to which this is a genuine two-way dialogue — thus consultation — remains to be seen as the program progresses over coming decades. Questions over the adequacy of consultation ahead of the launch of the Partners in the Blue Pacific (Fry et al. 5/7/2022)

suggest that there remain ongoing issues in how AUKUS partners approach meaningful engagement with Pacific leaders.

The threat of militarisation of the region

A second critique of AUKUS voiced by Pacific Island communities regards its perceived militarisation of the region. In a position statement released by the Pacific Elders’ Voice (PEV) — a collective of senior Pacific leaders including former presidents and prime ministers, the former PIF secretary general, regional ambassadors and academics — AUKUS is described as signalling ‘greater militarisation by joining Australia to the network of U.S. military bases in the northern Pacific’ (PEV 16/4/2023). This, the PEV argues, goes ‘against the spirit of the Blue Pacific narrative’ (ibid.), which, since its conception, has sought to advance a region that ‘is free from military competition’ (Malielegaoi 30/8/2018).

As a region that has been at the epicentre of global military conflict in the modern age (consider World War II, where the Pacific was the stage to one of a number of ‘theatres’ of military battle), Pacific communities are acutely aware of the impacts associated with militarisation (Koro 2023). This reality is particularly felt by the communities of Hawai’i and Guam, whose lands remain occupied by military bases. These communities have seen foreign-led warfare threaten the security of their peoples and associated militarisation lead to the compromise of their sovereignty, cultures and values (Aguon 2021; Kay-Trask 1999). Intensifying military activity is thus seen not only as a risk to regional stability (should Pacific nations get drawn (again) into external geopolitical conflict due to their geostrategic location) but a threat to the very ways of life that Pacific communities hold dear and seek to protect through their Blue Pacific vision.

It is difficult to deny that AUKUS is contributing to a militarisation of the Pacific via its expansion of an Indo-Pacific military complex.² It injects 11 highly sophisticated submarines into Australia’s defence apparatus (a member nation of PIF) alongside plans for the improvement of joint capabilities via an integration of industrial bases and supply chains that weave across the Pacific, proposes to enhance information and technology sharing between members, and promises a ‘strengthening [of] the security regimes of each nation’ (Albanese et al. 14/3/2023). This leaves AUKUS, and by extension the Indo-Pacific strategy of which it is the product, at odds with the Blue Pacific, given the latter’s opposition to militarisation. Or to put it more bluntly, AUKUS exposes how the Indo-Pacific’s (militarised) security priorities both contravene and undermine the core values of the Blue Pacific.

To the related debate surrounding the (contested) nuclear aspect of AUKUS’s submarine pathway, it should be recognised that multiple Pacific communities remain unconvinced that these military technologies will not breach the region’s proud nuclear-free stance. Struggled for under the

Nuclear Free and Independent Pacific movement, and enshrined in the Treaty of Rarotonga, communities across the region have long supported the position of a nuclear-free Pacific, and remained steadfast to such a commitment over the decades. Given that the Blue Pacific remains committed to the region's nuclear-free position (Bainimarama 29/8/2021), any transgression of this principle risks positioning the Indo-Pacific as a contending regional vision. Kiribati President Taneti Maamau, Vanuatu Parliamentarian Ralph Regenvanu, the PEV, the Pacific Conference of Churches and Pacific Network on Globalisation have all expressed concern that nuclear-powered submarines undermine this principle of a nuclear-free Pacific (Blades 17/9/2021; Middleby et al. 4/11/2021; PEV 16/4/2023; PANG 2023; Penjueli 6/4/2023) and, in some cases, contravene the Rarotonga Treaty (Regenvanu 5/4/2023).

As previously noted, AUKUS partners have gone to great pains to reiterate that Australia's submarine fleet will be strictly nuclear-powered, not armed. However, given the active US policy to neither confirm nor deny the presence or absence of nuclear weapons (a Glomar response), it is unlikely that suspicion over the potential carriage of nuclear weapons on these submarines will ease any time soon. At its most basic, the Pacific has been assured of the safety of nuclear technologies before, yet has experienced first-hand the extent of its devastation (PEV 16/4/2023). Whether the AUKUS submarines are strictly nuclear-powered or something potentially more, the fact that they are seen by many Pacific communities to go against the spirit of a nuclear-free Pacific is a major setback for the Indo-Pacific's legitimacy in the region.

Prioritising military investment over funds for climate action

The final way in which AUKUS suggests that the Indo-Pacific is incompatible with the Blue Pacific is its commitment to considerable military and defence spending all while Pacific Island communities demand greater funding for climate action. The Pacific Elders' Voice provides perhaps the most scathing expressions of this sentiment, declaring:

The staggering \$368 billion allocated for the AUKUS deal also flies in the face of Pacific Island countries which have been crying out for support for climate change. The fact that not even a significant fraction of this figure is available for the region to deal with the greatest security threat shows a complete lack of sensitivity to this key Pacific priority in Canberra, London, Paris and Washington. When there is money available for such military expansionism, surely the region's pressing existential threat from climate change also deserves this focus and substantive investment. (PEV 16/4/2023)

As described earlier, the Indo-Pacific and Blue Pacific approach the issue of security from

different viewpoints: the Indo-Pacific pursuing a more traditional, defence-centric understanding as contrasted against the Blue Pacific's expanded definition of security to encompass climate, human, environmental and gender issues. This naturally leads to differing security priorities and strategies, with AUKUS being a clear product of the Indo-Pacific's traditional security agenda. If it were just left at this theoretical level, such differences in security understandings between the Indo-Pacific and Blue Pacific need not be seen as a point of contention. However, when the reality of allocating funding from finite national budgets is taken into consideration, we come to see how the dominance of the Indo-Pacific in US, Australian and UK defence and foreign policy agendas may funnel resources away from investment in Blue Pacific interests and objectives. This is seemingly the case when it comes to climate finance, which receives relatively humble investment from AUKUS partners when compared to their significant spending on military and defence.

For decades the Pacific has been advocating greater action on climate change and increased investment to support such initiatives. The 2018 Boe Declaration identified climate change as the region's primary security threat, and this is similarly expressed by the Blue Pacific as made clear through the 2050 Strategy for a Blue Pacific Continent. When the Pacific has been calling for greater investment in climate action so as to tackle the rapidly approaching 'existential threat' of climate change (PIFS 3/2/2021), it is unsurprising that the multi-billion dollar AUKUS program that Australia, the US and the UK are willing to invest in has drawn criticism. For Pacific Island communities who consider climate change — not China — to be the leading security threat of the region, the Indo-Pacific can be viewed as a diversion: shifting the priority from climate action and towards that of a complex, costly military ambition. Given the urgency of climate security to the Pacific region, such diversion of focus and funds is potentially pernicious across both the immediate and long term.

In sum, it appears that the Indo-Pacific vision is moving in a direction that not only differs from the Blue Pacific but may directly undermine it. I note that at the time of writing, Fiji's Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka and Prime Minister of the Cook Islands Mark Brown have declared their support for AUKUS, however, they remain in the minority among regional leaders. Overwhelmingly, Blue Pacific leaders (political and civil society alike) remain highly cautious, if not critical, of AUKUS. The failure of AUKUS members to consult Blue Pacific leaders on the program has drawn pointed critique, compounded by concerns regarding militarisation and the sidelining of regional climate security priorities. As such, the AUKUS program — the centrepiece of the Indo-Pacific vision — appears to pose a threat to the priorities and values embodied in the Blue Pacific.

Conclusion

Despite overlap in their geographic scope (Pacific Ocean) and membership (Australia), the Blue Pacific and Indo-Pacific have developed an uneasy relationship over recent years. These regional mappings embody two diverging approaches to security that, with the announcement of AUKUS, have reached a point of competition. If not evident before, AUKUS has confirmed that the geostrategic lens through which the Indo-Pacific approaches the Pacific Islands region is deeply incompatible with Blue Pacific priorities and values. Its expansive defence and security program contravenes the Blue Pacific's firm opposition to militarisation and overlooks the central importance of climate action as a security priority for Pacific Island communities. This supports suggestions that the Indo-Pacific does more than simply compete with the Blue Pacific for geopolitical authority, but that it undermines its very values and priorities. What potential for complementarity existed between these two regional visions has been severely damaged with the pursuit of AUKUS.

Discussions from the recent 52nd PIF Leaders Meeting (Pacific Islands Forum Leaders 9/11/2023) and comments by former PIFS secretary general, Dame Meg Taylor (Taylor 2023) make it clear that the Blue Pacific is something that Pacific leaders will struggle fiercely to protect. It not only stands distinct from the Indo-Pacific vision, but increasingly appears at odds with it. As such, one would be misguided to attempt to subsume the Blue Pacific into the Indo-Pacific, particularly under the guise of purported complementarity. Respect for the vision and values of the Blue Pacific is thus critical for those engaging with Oceania, albeit if it raises challenges for Indo-Pacific aspirations. To call on the words of Cristelle Pratt, a leading policymaker and adviser to the Pacific, 'The Blue Pacific cannot and will not become an aside in this new Indo-Pacific frame' (Pratt 4/3/2019).

Moving forward, the apparent incongruity of Blue Pacific and Indo-Pacific visions raises some prickly but essential questions for Pacific Islands and metropolitan actors alike. What implications does an ever-deepening Indo-Pacific rollout have for Pacific Islands regionalism? What role does Australia (as a PIF member) hold in advocating for the Blue Pacific among its Indo-Pacific partners? How does Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative sit with respect to this conversation, and in particular the Blue Pacific construct? These questions (along with many more) will require grappling with as the Blue Pacific and Indo-Pacific continue to evolve. Dame Meg Taylor has emphasised the importance of assertive and unified Pacific regionalism if the region is to successfully navigate these issues in a way that advances Pacific values, interests and self-determination (Taylor 2023). This will undoubtedly require strong, considered and broadly supported regional leadership. Equally, reflexive and respectful engagement with Pacific decision-makers and communities is needed from metropolitan partners,

starting (but not ending) with a commitment to deep listening and meaningful consultation.

If this paper can emphasise one point in these discussions, it is that the Blue Pacific is a self-determined regional vision that remains staunchly independent from the Indo-Pacific. The seemingly irreconcilable priorities of the Blue Pacific and Indo-Pacific undercut suggestions that these visions can be progressed in complementarity. Indeed, with the announcement of AUKUS they appear to be increasingly at odds with one another. For external partners engaging with the Pacific, the Blue Pacific should be recognised as the framework of identity, regionalism and diplomacy that the region is asserting for itself. Moving forward, it is imperative that it be respected as such.

Author notes

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Endnotes

1. Despite having signed a AUD 90 billion submarine contract with Australia in 2019, France is also reported to have been caught off-guard by the AUKUS announcement on 16 September 2021 (Barnes and Makinda 16/8/2022).
2. Furthermore, AUKUS contributes to a (growing) militarisation of Australian, UK and US defence approaches.
3. The Australian Government has committed AUD 3 billion towards climate finance over the period 2020–25, in addition to an AUD 3.5 billion Climate Solutions Package for domestic climate action programs. While costings on the AUKUS program remain changeable, it is estimated that Australia will contribute between AUD 268 billion and 368 billion by 2050. More concretely, the 2023 Australian budget allocates AUD 9 billion for AUKUS over the next four years and up to AUD 58 billion over the next decade.

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