



What is Distinctive about Vanuatu's Foreign Policy?

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Vanuatu has just produced its first ever Foreign Policy Paper, entitled *National Foreign Policy: A Foreign Policy for Vanuatu and its People* (Republic of Vanuatu 2024), which gives expression to longstanding principles of the way Vanuatu engages with the world. Among these are support for non-alignment, UN peacekeeping, denuclearisation and decolonisation as well as a commitment to the region's 2018 Boe Declaration and 2022 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent. Above all, Vanuatu has sought to avoid being a mere satrapy of more powerful states such as Australia.

Vanuatu's foreign policy has origins in a distinctive colonial history, and in its struggle to be independent during the 1970s.

Vanuatu's colonial administration was a mixed affair, managed both by Britain and France simultaneously, giving rise to anglophone and francophone populations. A rebellion interrupted its entry into independence – the Nagriamel nativist revolt on Santo led by Jimmy Stevens, who in May 1980 declared a 'Republic of Vemerana' under his leadership and with the support of French settlers. The French government itself did not want the 'New Hebrides', as it was called, to be independent fearing a precedent for New Caledonia. In the end the new government of Vanuatu under prime minister Walter Lini persuaded Papua New Guinea, with Australia's assistance, to send a small interventionary force, the Kumul Force. With only one death and in a matter of weeks, the Kumul Force brought the rebellion to an end, and independent Vanuatu emerged territorially intact (Macqueen 1988). We need to contrast this independence struggle in Vanuatu with the more straightforward path to independent statehood experienced by most of the other Forum Island countries.

Vanuatu began with a principled foreign policy and has to a large extent kept it. Non-alignment, for example, meant that Vanuatu established diplomatic relations with Cuba and the Soviet Union in the 1980s before recognising the United States. Vanuatu is one of only three Pacific Island states to join the non-aligned movement (the others are Papua New Guinea and Fiji), and the only one that has consistently championed the human rights (and right to self-determination) of the West Papuans in Indonesia, a cause that other Melanesian countries have flirted with in forums such as the Melanesian Spearhead Group.

Vanuatu's commitment to international and regional peace is illustrated by the participation of ni-Vanuatu police in peacekeeping operations. Fiji is a far larger contributor to overseas peacekeeping both absolutely and relatively. But Vanuatu's involvement is all the more surprising given the country's small population of about 326,000: police have gone to UN peacekeeping operations in Timor-Leste, Darfur, Haiti, Bosnia, Sudan, South Sudan, Côte d'Ivoire, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo as well as to Bougainville and the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands 2003–17.

Recognised by 16 foreign states in 1980, and by China in 1982, Vanuatu is now recognised by 125, including, this year, Bahrain. The Foreign Policy Paper frankly outlines the international situation that the country faces:

... geostrategic competition in our region has put significant demands on our diplomacy and has thrust us, unwillingly, into a situation of great power competition in our region. It has tested the robustness and resilience of longstanding foreign policy positions and relationships. At the same time, it has provided opportunities for leveraging our new-found strategic relevance into tangible development gains for our people. (Republic of Vanuatu 2024:6)

Examples of such leverage may be found in Vanuatu's relations with China, the United States and Australia. Vanuatu joined the Chinese Belt and Road initiative in 2018 and sees the one-China policy as a 'key pillar in Vanuatu's foreign policy'. In fact, 'China has become one of Vanuatu's most significant and valued development partners, with a particular focus on major national infrastructure projects and a growing security partnership' (Republic of Vanuatu 2024:27). Vanuatu is the latest Pacific Islands country to experience Chinese largesse, this time in the form of a lavish presidential palace, estimated to have cost AU\$31 million. The palace in Vila is far beyond the pretensions of a small island state and quite unlike the kind of development assistance other donors might offer. Days after the Chinese handed over the palace in July 2024, prime minister Charlot Salwai made a visit to Beijing, where the two sides signed 13 memoranda of understanding with a focus on infrastructure, especially improving the roads around Vila, and upgrading the capabilities of the

Vanuatu Broadcasting and Television Corporation (Toara 13/7/2024). While in Beijing, Salwai met President Xi Jinping.

The United States lacked an embassy in Vanuatu for many years. This oversight was rectified only in July 2024 with the opening of the new American embassy in Vila as part of a general initiative by the US to improve its relations with small Pacific countries being courted by China. Vanuatu has a 'shiprider' agreement with the US, enabling ni-Vanuatu officials to police the country's maritime exclusive economic zones from on board a US Navy or coastguard vessel. And in the past Vanuatu has been the beneficiary of US development assistance in the form of \$US66 million for road building from the Millennium Challenge Corporation, a US aid organisation established by Congress.

As for Australia, the Foreign Policy Paper points out its centrality to Vanuatu's economic affairs: 'Australia remains our major security, trade and development partner, our main destination for offshore workers, our largest source of tourists and a major source of investment' (Republic of Vanuatu 2024:26). Ni-Vanuatu have been travelling overseas for seasonal work since 2007, first under New Zealand's well-designed Recognised Seasonal Employer scheme and then increasingly to Australia under the Pacific Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme, and they have made more use of it per capita than any other Pacific country even though they have now been surpassed in sheer numbers by Fiji. Under a ballot scheme open until August 2024, Vanuatu is one of the Pacific countries whose citizens are eligible to enter Australia permanently under a Pacific Engagement Visa, the first time Australia has had such a route to migration from the region. 'Labour mobility issues', the paper reminds us, 'will remain an important aspect of our foreign policy into the foreseeable future' (Republic of Vanuatu 2024:38).

We are left with the question: what is distinctive about Vanuatu's foreign policy? The West Papua example is instructive, though complicated by the continual succession of new prime ministers with individual points of view. Former prime minister Sato Kilman, for instance, openly supported the Indonesian position on West Papua. On the other hand, Vanuatu has established a reputation over the years for supporting the independence of West Papua from Indonesia and continues to do so under the present government.

Vanuatu has now appointed Lauru Lini, the daughter of the man seen as the founder of modern Vanuatu —

Walter Lini — as the country's special envoy for West Papua. The foreign minister Ralph Regenvanu has announced that in 2025 he will move a resolution at the United Nations to have West Papua inscribed on the UN decolonisation list. Seeking regional support, Charlot Salwai as Vanuatu prime minister will take the text of the proposed resolution to this year's meeting of Pacific Forum leaders in Tonga. A pride in having a foreign policy that is their own remains characteristic of the ni-Vanuatu attitude.

Author notes

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