



5. Managing geopolitical tensions to advance maritime security cooperation

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Pacific maritime security cooperation: views from the Pacific and its partners

- Pacific Island countries collectively manage geopolitical competition by pursuing shared interests through national and regional policy instruments. For maritime security, partners' maritime security agendas are directed towards respect for the Blue Pacific identity and engaging with the expanded concept of security under the 2018 *Boe Declaration for Regional Security*.
- The Large Ocean States of the Pacific are redefining their ocean space as a Blue Pacific Ocean Continent. This is to ensure that the collective political efforts of Pacific Island countries, as outlined in the *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent*, remain central to external interests in the region.

Reframing the region as a Blue Pacific Ocean Continent is about 'strengthen[ing] the existing policy frameworks that harness the ocean as a driver of a transformative socio-cultural, political and economic development of the Pacific...[and]... gives renewed impetus to deepening Pacific regionalism.'¹⁴⁵

The *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent* sets the Pacific Islands Forum's (PIF's) direction and priorities for internal and external political and security relations. The *Boe Declaration* articulates the Pacific's priorities for maritime security under an expanded concept of security that includes human security, environmental and resource security, transnational crime, and cyber security. This paper explores political efforts to advance Pacific maritime security priorities in an era of

geostrategic competition, understanding that Pacific Island countries view maritime security as extending beyond the ocean to include the land, the people, and the environment.¹⁴⁶

There is a fundamental mismatch between the Indo-Pacific maritime security framing of metropolitan powers and the Pacific's counter framing of the **Blue Pacific Ocean Continent**. Historically, the Pacific has been a region of interest to external partners for its geostrategic location and the region's abundant resources. To the people of the Pacific, this dynamic and diverse region is home. The Indo-Pacific framing is, at its core, competitive, designed to limit China's strategic control of critical maritime choke points and island chains. Waqavakatoga and Wallis (2023) outline the risks posed by this geopolitical competition, including threats to regional solidarity, a race to the bottom among donors, overwhelming debt burdens, the strain on absorptive capacity, and culturally insensitive investments that undermine local stability.¹⁴⁷

The Pacific's stance of 'friends to all' affirms their resolute pursuit of sovereignty and political autonomy as independent countries.¹⁴⁸ Kabutaulaka (2021) has articulated the disempowering impact of external geostrategic claims upon the Pacific and noted the continued influence of this practice.¹⁴⁹ Naupa (2017) has argued the Blue Pacific identity is a shift in Pacific diplomacy with the Blue Pacific framing as a 'new super region is a strategic opportunity for the Pacific Islands to place themselves

at the forefront' of diplomacy on maritime security.¹⁵⁰ Koro, McNeill, Ivarature, and Wallis (2023) have also argued that 'dominant western accounts do not adequately account for the geopolitics of the Pacific because they overlook the multi-temporal, multi-spatial, multiscalar, and relational ways in which states and other actors behave in the Pacific, and how Pacific Island states and Oceanic peoples perceive, respond to, and influence their behaviour.'¹⁵¹ Accordingly, reimagining Pacific geopolitics and addressing the ethical dilemmas of these external geopolitical designs upon the Blue Pacific cannot be understated.¹⁵²

Foremost, the escalation of military involvement in the Pacific represented by the AUKUS agreement between the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia is at odds with the Pacific Island countries' priorities for their Blue Pacific Continent. Former PIF Secretary General Dame Meg Taylor has articulated the 'Blue Pacific's firm and long-standing opposition to militarization,'¹⁵³ a goal that can only be realised when partners respectfully prioritise the peace component of the 2050 Strategy's thematic area for Peace and Security. Reconciling the divergent security priorities of metropolitan powers and the Pacific Island countries lies at the heart of contemporary diplomatic relations for the Blue Pacific Continent.



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To protect their ocean continent, the PIF leads innovative maritime security initiatives like the **South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty** 1985 (also known as the Treaty of Rarotonga) and more recently the 2023 **Declaration on the Continuity of Statehood and the Protection of Persons in the Face of Climate Change Related Sea Level Rise** initiated by Tuvalu.¹⁵⁴ The 2021 **Declaration on Preserving**

Maritime Zones in the Face of Climate Change-related Sea-Level Rise is already exerting substantial influence on the interpretation of maritime boundary laws.¹⁵⁵ The Declaration operates to assert sovereign rights and preserve maritime boundaries, reinforcing their framing as 'Large Ocean States'. This declaration also operates to prevent any increase in the extent of the high seas enclaves, areas where Pacific Island countries have less control of extractive activities in their Blue Pacific Ocean Continent. It is noteworthy that effective and innovative advocacy by Pacific Island countries has already substantially limited fishing activities in these high seas enclaves.¹⁵⁶ Additionally, there is the **Mota Lava Treaty** between Solomon Islands and Vanuatu on maritime boundaries, formally recognized by the UN in 2016,¹⁵⁷ and the **Tirvau Agreement** between the same countries, also on maritime boundaries, based on their cultural heritage.¹⁵⁸

The Pacific's priority interests are pursued through their relentless fight for climate and nuclear justice.¹⁵⁹ The region's support

for the re-election of the Marshall Islands on the UN Human Rights Commission is a step in the right direction for advocacy on these issues. Recent achievements on nuclear issues include obtaining ongoing monitoring evaluation from the International Atomic Energy Agency on the release of contaminated Fukushima wastewater, and securing a place for this subject as a standing item for the **PIF leaders' meeting** and the **Pacific Islands Leaders Meeting (PALM)** summit hosted by Japan.¹⁶⁰ The **Pacific Resilience Facility**, a Pacific-led transformational initiative that invests in communities vulnerable to climate change, speaks to the Pacific's leadership in implementing its expanded concept of security in the maritime space. In his 2024 speech to the PIF Foreign Ministers Meeting, the PIF's Secretary General Baron Waqa stated that 'geopolitical manoeuvring means nothing to Pacific peoples who have water lapping at their doorsteps due to sea level rise' to emphasise that climate change remains the Pacific's top security priority.¹⁶¹ As a further demonstration of

commitment to climate action, Pacific leaders recently agreed to elevate sea level rise as a standalone item at the United Nations General Assembly.¹⁶²

Solidarity remains the PIF's signature policy approach to managing the geopolitical environment. As eloquently put by a longstanding PIF leader, the Samoan Prime Minister Honourable Fiaame Naomi Mata'afa, 'our survival is premised on our togetherness'.¹⁶³ In 2022, noting the geopolitical competition playing out in the region, PIF leaders reaffirmed the need for a fit for purpose regional architecture to effectively deliver on the *2050 Strategy*.¹⁶⁴

A renewed regional architecture is envisaged to enhance coordination and strengthen links between leaders' policy decisions across sectors and the collective priorities for the region. For this reason, it was not a coincidence that Tonga, as host and Chair of the 2024 PIF leaders' meeting, reaffirmed the importance of integrated resilience across all communities to leverage collective solutions for the region.

To achieve the vision for a fit for purpose regional architecture, leaders have endorsed four key considerations, namely: (i) political settings for collective interests and decision making; (ii) institutional settings and mechanisms; (iii) governance mechanisms; and (iv) engagement with partners.¹⁶⁵ Through enhanced coordination, the review presents the opportunity:

- to streamline decision-making processes at the PIF, ensuring that all members have equal input in setting the PIF leaders' annual agenda;
- improve the transparency and equity of members' contributions to tackle perceived power imbalances; and
- ensure that a renewed structure is fit for purpose and manageable for the PIF Secretariat and members.

Now in its third phase, the **Review of the Regional Architecture** will look at how '[l]eaders ensure that there is collective political leadership that is aligned to international law and unity to overcome shared challenges and disputes, as well as to maintain collective momentum on the *2050 Strategy*'.¹⁶⁶ The **Review of the Post Forum Dialogue** falls under consideration (iv) of the review of the regional architecture. Wesley-Smith and Finin (2024) have highlighted the

'growing concerns about climate change, rising militarisation, and inadequate consultation on major initiatives,' which reflect the insufficient consideration of Pacific priorities by external partners.

In 2019, the '**Blue Pacific Principles for Dialogue and Engagement**' were endorsed by PIF leaders to align external partners involvement in the Pacific with the *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent*. Subsequently, in 2024 PIF leaders endorsed the recommendation for a new '**Forum Partnership Mechanism**'¹⁶⁷ that links the access and privileges of **Forum Dialogue Partners** to a tiered system, outlining rigorous partnership conditions, reporting requirements, and accountability measures.¹⁶⁸ These revisions to Forum Dialogue Partner engagement encourage external partners to genuinely commit to the Blue Pacific framing and its priorities, rather than merely paying lip service.¹⁶⁹ The Forum Dialogue Partner conditions are a component of a broader array of 'tactical, shrewd, and calculate[d] approaches'¹⁷⁰ that Pacific Island countries employ to manage the ongoing competition among materially more powerful states.

To prevent Pacific Island countries from being objects in external defence strategies and to enhance their agency¹⁷¹ it is essential partner countries maintain the alignment with the *Boe Declaration* and the *2050 Strategy*. All efforts should be made to ensure the priorities of the region, under the vision of the Blue Pacific Continent, are respected.

