

Review of the New Pacific Diplomacy

Robert Nicole

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The basic argument advanced in this fine book is that since 2009 and Fiji's suspension from the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), there has been a "paradigm shift" in the way that Pacific Island states engage with regional and world politics – a "new Pacific diplomacy". The contributors represent an impressive range of Pacific leaders, senior diplomats, scholars, civil society leaders and other intellectuals, whose work is brought together by two of the region's most seasoned diplomacy scholars, Greg Fry and Sandra Tarte.

In their introduction, the editors advance the provocative assertion that the new diplomacy is as cataclysmic as the creation of the Forum in 1970 and as significant as the transition from the colonial to the postcolonial era. It comes at a time when Island states are making unprecedented efforts to unite and heighten a collective Pacific voice in global affairs and thereby wrest control of the political agenda and negotiations from foreign domination.

Most contributors point to the stultifying influence of Australia and New Zealand as a key factor in causing this shift in diplomacy. They argue that the two neighbours have made it increasingly difficult for PICs (Pacific Island Countries) to pursue joint regional positions on important collective interests such as climate change or to form alliances of interests with other South-based organisations. Yet, the book is less about resistance to foreign domination than it is about revealing the new arenas and channels that Pacific countries are using to create opportunities and avenues for themselves to influence regional and global diplomacy.

The first of the book's seven sections focuses on recent developments in the regional diplomacy. It begins with an address by former President Anote Tong of Kiribati in which he indirectly evokes Epeli Hau'ofa's Oceania essays and declares that "we are large ocean states". This sets the scene for the rest of the book and the view that Pacific countries are strong and can be influential provided they remain steadfast in their pursuit of self-determination and continue to be creative and strong in their solidarity.

President Tong's powerful call for Pacific leadership in international relations is followed by a proposal for a new regional architecture by Kaliopate Tavola, one of the Pacific's most accomplished diplomats. Tavola argues that the PIFS-led status quo has failed to deliver on long promised but long under-delivered benefits of regionalism. The all PSIDS (Pacific Small Islands Developing States) Forum that he proposes instead would free up PSIDS to push their island-specific issues in global forums and grow stronger South-South partnerships. It would keep Australia and New Zealand at arm's length and yet retain their goodwill and generosity by way of a formally negotiated inter-regional agreement similar to the EU's Cotonou Agreement ACP countries. This proposal will generate important discussions in the national capitals of the Pacific.

Amidst a chorus of discontent about the "old" Australia-New Zealand and PIF led regional

diplomacy, Dame Meg Taylor (current secretary-general of PIFS), is given the opportunity to position the institution in relation to the Pacific's fast changing diplomatic landscape. She lays out the philosophy of PIF's Framework for Pacific Regionalism which she views as a major shift in the development paradigm. She speaks of a 'deeper regionalism' in which Forum leaders determine the region's priorities primarily through an open public process. The outcome of the 2015 Forum meeting in PNG suggests that the new PIFS paradigm has yet to take effect. This was manifested most dramatically on the critical issue of climate change, where Australia and New Zealand again effectively prevented any change to the status quo.

Two hard-hitting articles follow from Dame Meg's chapter. Claire Slatter and Maureen Penjueli unpack the PIF framework and assess whether it is likely to lead to anything new especially in relation to (i) its development model built on free trade and economic integration and (ii) its consideration of the views and ideas of civil society groups. On economic policy, they see the Forum's neoliberal model of development as fundamentally flawed. The stubborn persistence with this model means that like the Pacific Plan before it, the Forum's new framework is likely to fail. On PIFS' promise to be more inclusive, both contributors point to the Forum's long history of shutting out NGO participation in regional decision-making. They are sceptical that the new framework will bring about the kind of robust permanent process that is necessary to bring the strength and diversity of NGOs into the inner mechanics of regional decision-making.

Sandra Tarte's chapter is a useful overview of the context, processes and outcomes of the inaugural meeting of PIDF (Pacific Islands Development Forum) in 2013. PIDF is presented as the expression of a profound disillusionment with the current regional order. It reflects a consensus among Pacific leaders that new approaches must be developed to meet the challenges posed by a myriad of social, economic, and environmental problems. By accommodating non-state actors as full members of the process, PIDF has mounted a significant challenge to the donor-dominated CROP system. Yet, the chapter leaves the reader with a sense of the enormity of the task that still lies ahead as PIDF embarks on the difficult path to fulfil its promise.

In her refreshing study of Pacific collaboration in global diplomacy, Fulori Manoa attributes recent successes to PSIDS working innovatively together in New York and doing so independently of Australia and New Zealand. Among the group's achievements are French Polynesia's re-inscription on the list of non-self-governing territories and achieving stand-alone SDGs on oceans and climate change. None of these successes, she writes, would have been possible without asserting significant autonomy from the Australian and New Zealand positions. Smallness and lack of resources, she concludes, are not synonymous with helplessness.

The Fiji section of the book begins with a chapter by the country's roving ambassador, Litia Mawi, that extols her government's recent diplomatic achievements. She credits Fiji for pioneering a new era in Pacific diplomacy through its "look north" policy, a plethora of new diplomatic ties, stronger South-South cooperation, and the establishment of PIDF with its focus on problem-solving, green growth, and inclusivity. Makareta Komai complements Mawi's chapter. Both authors conclude that through a combination of necessity and astute stratagem, Fiji has moved beyond Australia and New Zealand and now looks to the world to reclaim its position as an influential regional leader and catalyst for change.

The third section examines the manoeuvrings of powerful forces from outside the island Pacific. Michael O’Keefe, for instance, argues that China and Russia’s growing assertiveness is disrupting US hegemony. This competition presents opportunities for Pacific diplomacy. In her chapter on Australia and New Zealand, Nicola Baker uses an interesting array of sources (including archival sources and references to WikiLeaks) to unsettle the appearance of Australian leadership and trans-Tasman unity in Pacific regionalism. New Zealand – particularly under the formidable leadership of Helen Clark – has provided much of the intellectual leadership as well as a nuanced, moderating, and sophisticated alternative to Australia’s assertive interventionism (especially in the 1990s and 2000s). She cautions though, that New Zealand’s belated managerial style is threatening to tarnish its hard-earned reputation and make it indistinguishable from its Australian bigger brother.

The section on sub-regionalism begins with Tess Newton-Cain’s overview of the achievements, challenges and opportunities of the MSG (Melanesian Spearhead Group). Amidst its many achievements, the thorny issue of West Papua and future referendums in New Caledonia and Bougainville loom large as potential turning points in the configuration of the group. In spite of these risks she suggests that the MSG is sufficiently flexible to accommodate major differences of national interest and to continue to play a primary role in regional affairs. Marawa – a former Fijian Director of Trade – views the Melanesian free trade agreement as a positive outcome of Melanesian diplomacy. This is manifested in the increased movement of labour and goods between Fiji and PNG. Whether the resulting economic growth is equitable or merely strengthens those groups and economies in the MSG that are already strong (Fiji and PNG) are debates that will demand pursuing particularly in view of Slatter and Penjueli’s chapters. The chapter by Gallen accounts for the obstacles that hinder sub-regional cooperation among small island states in the North Pacific and between the North and South Pacific. She suggests that “Micronesia needs to look South” rather than to pursue its current orientation towards North America. How to cultivate this relationship between the North and the South of Oceania is left unanswered but is worthy of further discussion.

The last third of the book examines four key areas in which the Pacific’s new diplomacy is being deployed: climate change, fisheries, trade, and decolonisation. On climate change, Goulding and Carter examine the Pacific’s efficacy at influencing global negotiations. Frustrated by the UNFCCC (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change) processes, they explain that some Pacific states have broken rank with traditional Pacific allies to join “state clubs” or “coalition blocs” that they think will better advance their interests. While Goulding sees such clubs as a fragmentation of and threat to regional solidarity, Carter argues that the emergence of PSIDS and the Coalition of Atoll Nations is bringing some cohesion back into the Pacific’s climate change activism and generating significant global attention. While Goulding questions the ability and willingness of Pacific states to achieve a cohesive platform on climate change, Carter suggests that as climate change negotiations have evolved and processes matured, so too have the diplomatic capabilities and effectiveness of Pacific states. This difference of opinion between the two young scholars will generate interesting debate.

Tuna negotiations in the Pacific are a David versus Goliath battle in which the Pacific has

used smart negotiations to overcome the divisive and heavy-handed bargaining power of the most powerful trading blocs in the world: the US and EU. Transform Aqorau explains that the PNA (Parties to the Nauru Agreement), as a sub-regional group, has transformed regional tuna negotiations and strengthened the negotiating hand of its members. Tarai's chapter shows that the PNA's success has had major implications beyond its membership, particularly in the region-wide tuna negotiations with the United States. The skilful but non-negotiable imposition of the VDS (Vessel Day Scheme) championed by the PNA, has led to a final settlement in 2014 that doubled the US government original "take it or leave it" offer. PICs have also exploited rivalries between China and the US to swing negotiations in their favour. Thus, PICs have used internal and external leverages to effectively swing trade in tuna to their own advantage.

Morgan argues that PICs have more agency in international trade negotiations than is commonly understood. In his view, Pacific officials have been tough negotiators who have driven a hard bargain with the EU on the EPA (Economic Partnership Agreement) and with Australia and New Zealand on PACER Plus (Pacific Agreement on Closer Economic Relations). This has broadened the agenda of negotiations in the island countries' favour. He cites the tariff-free access to the EU for Pacific fish and the seasonal employment scheme in Australia and New Zealand as indicators of success. These are marginal gains for Pacific negotiating schemes and suggest that in spite of Morgan's optimism, trade will remain an ongoing terrain of struggle for Pacific diplomacy.

Nic Maclellan's chapter on decolonisation is packed with engaging information. He argues that while PICs have achieved some success, significant challenges remain. With PIF no longer acting as a viable platform to support independence movements in the region, Maclellan writes that PICs have sought other spaces such as the MSG and PSIDS. Among the successes, Maclellan notes the historic decision in 2013 by the UN General Assembly to reinscribe French Polynesia on the UN list of non-self-governing territories. The West Papuan case, however, has been more challenging. Maclellan observes that while Pacific governments have been happy to criticise the French government over its Pacific colonies, they are less keen to attack Indonesia in spite of its appalling human rights record in West Papua. But as the West Papuan leader Octo Mote evokes, West Papua is "a nation in waiting" and the issue will not go away. Maclellan documents the rift between those (Vanuatu and FLNKS) that support the West Papuan right to self-determination, and those (Fiji and PNG) who support greater engagement with Indonesia. He thus shows that while many of the failures of Pacific regionalism can be attributed to outside forces, they are also caused by problems, such as narrow national interests, that are endemic to Pacific Island states.

The book ends with two reflective pieces from Henry Puna (current Prime Minister of the Cook Islands) and Sir Michael Somare (former Prime Minister of PNG). While the first follows in Eveli Hau'ofa's wake and calls for a re-imagining of the Pacific, the second emphasises the importance of an open yet self-determining MSG that is responsive to the welfare of all Pacific peoples – not just its Melanesians inhabitants.

Like the shift in diplomacy it examines, this book will mark a turning point in the way that people understand Pacific regionalism. Policy-makers in the capitals of Pacific nations as well as Canberra, Wellington, Brussels, and New York will find provocative ideas with significant implications for future negotiations as well as radical ideas about the future architecture of

Pacific regional cooperation. Academics and students will find in it new thinking to inform undergraduate and postgraduate courses in diplomacy. Its twenty-one are highly readable and represent the most complete and current book available on Pacific diplomacy. USP – as a centre of research for thinking about the critical Pacific issues of our time – and the ANU press, can both be justifiably proud of producing a book of such quality. My only reservation is that while it is very upbeat about the shift in diplomacy, the book leaves very little room for critiques of this new diplomacy. No doubt, now that the book exists, these critical perspectives will soon proliferate and thus continue to breathe new energy and rigour into our collective thinking about this region and the welfare of its people.