

The Pacific Dialogue

The University of the South Pacific
Suva, Fiji

2 – 3 December 2024

Outcomes Document

SOUTH PACIFIC OCEAN

Executive Summary

- The Pacific Dialogue – hosted by The University of the South Pacific with the support of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office of the British Government - is the only Track Two mechanism in the Pacific Islands region focussed on fostering and supporting dialogue on critical geopolitical and security issues in the Pacific.
- The Asia Pacific regional order is facing profound changes due to the rapidly shifting distribution of wealth and power, intensifying competition between China and the United States, escalating territorial tensions, the rise of militarisation and the intersecting challenges of climate change and human security needs. The Pacific Islands region sits at the confluence of the defence strategies of multiple actors.
- The 2024 Pacific Dialogue focussed on deepening understanding of the nature of strategic competition in the wider Asia Pacific region including the shift in power and wealth that is redefining the international system and the high risk of war – both conventional and nuclear.
- Against this geopolitical backdrop, the 2024 Pacific Dialogue focussed on crisis management mechanisms the Pacific has – or needs to have – to enable an Ocean of Peace in the face of escalating conflict. At the core of this discussion was the question: what kind of regional order does the Pacific want to shape?
- The Pacific Dialogue is an increasingly important mechanism which can provide independent ideas and advice in support of the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat to better understand issues and inform policies driving regionalism.
- The Pacific Dialogue has introduced two new activities: (1) a Youth Dialogue to develop inter-generational knowledge of and dialogue about critical geopolitical and security issues in the Pacific; and (2) commissioned policy papers on critical issues discussed at the Pacific Dialogue with the aim of informing and deepening strategic thinking. The papers will be produced in the first half of 2025.

Recommendations

Advancing the Ocean of Peace will require strengthening institutional mechanisms and governance. The Pacific Dialogue makes the following recommendations to the Pacific Islands Forum:

- 1.** Revitalise regional commitment to the Treaty of Rarotonga to include active monitoring processes and ensure Pacific island countries not party to the Treaty are included in related discussions.
- 2.** Establish pre-declared principles and protocols under a Code of Conduct to prevent and mitigate inter-state conflicts, focusing on non-aggression, territorial respect, human and environmental protection.
- 3.** Integrate civil society's justice-oriented advocacy into the Ocean of Peace to ensure that peace is not narrowly defined by state-centric or militarised frameworks.
- 4.** Leverage the Melanesian Spearhead Group, Polynesian Leaders' Group, Micronesian Presidents' Summit and other subregional groupings to operationalise Ocean of Peace principles
- 5.** Clarify how the Ocean of Peace will address the aspirations of the non-sovereign Pacific for self-determination.
- 6.** Create avenues for meaningful youth engagement to ensure their voices are heard, their ideas valued, and their leadership nurtured to cultivate a shared sense of purpose and ownership.

Background

- The Pacific Dialogue was established at USP in 2023 with the central purpose of fostering and supporting dialogue on geopolitical and security issues in the Pacific. As a Track Two process, the Pacific Dialogue aims to play a crucial role in building trust, familiarity and confidence between officials, academics, and civil society as we seek to find collective Pacific-led and owned solutions to the challenges we face today and into the future.
- At the inaugural Pacific Dialogue held in December 2023, it was agreed there is a need for such a mechanism within the regional architecture that adds to the regional and national conversations about security. Two issues also emerged: militarisation and the Pacific's ability to manage intensifying strategic competition.
- It was subsequently determined that the second Pacific Dialogue would focus exclusively on the following: crisis management mechanisms the Pacific has – or needs to have – to enable an Ocean of Peace in the face of escalating conflict.
- The concept of the Ocean of Peace as developed by the Government of Fiji was first considered by Leaders in 2023. At the 53rd PIF held in Tonga in August 2024, Leaders reaffirmed their vision for a region of peace and welcomed the alignment of the concept for the Ocean of Peace with Pacific Islands Forum declarations including the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent, the 2018 Boe Declaration on Regional Security and the 2000 Biketawa Declaration. A draft concept on the Ocean of Peace Declaration is to be developed by the PIF Secretariat for consideration by Leaders at the 54th Pacific Islands Forum in Honiara, Solomon Islands in 2025.
- By focusing on militarisation trends and their implications for the Pacific, the 2024 Pacific Dialogue aimed to further contextualise the Ocean of Peace principles, in particular whether these provided sufficient guardrails in the face of escalating conflict; and to explore crisis response mechanisms and other practical measures to advance the Ocean of Peace.

Overview of 2024 Pacific Dialogue

The 2024 Pacific Dialogue focused on three key inter-related themes:

1. The Drivers and Implications of Escalating Tensions in the Asia Pacific region

- The Asia Pacific regional order has been framed by American power since 1945 however this is changing fast with significant implications for the Pacific. The United States' primacy within the international order is being challenged for the first time.
- There has been a profound shift in power and wealth within the international system as a result of China's rising power leading to a zero sum and protracted contest between the United States and China. While there are multiple dimensions to the U.S.-Sino rivalry, ultimately it is a military contest. War is not inevitable but the risk of war – both conventional and nuclear – is high in the Asia Pacific, particularly over Taiwan.
- The multilateral system and international law, processes and norms on which Pacific countries depend for much of their sovereign capability is being undermined by strategic competition. The Pacific region must therefore proactively monitor and be prepared to collectively and strategically address the adverse impacts of these challenges.
- Smaller countries can collectively pressure countries such as the U.S. and China to clarify their security policies and explain how they will incorporate international law (to deter and regulate warfare) into their own military doctrine. For example, the United Nations General Assembly mandated panel tasked with studying the impact of a future nuclear war (L-39, 2024) will be valuable to Pacific countries.

2. Militarisation of the Pacific

- Security developments in the Pacific islands region, such as AUKUS, the dispersion strategies of countries including the U.S. and France, and the growing securitisation of space (including by commercial actors such as Starlink), are heightening the militarisation of the Pacific.
- The Treaty of Rarotonga, as an instrument of international law, and dependent on political will, could serve as the region's principal guardrail against nuclear militarisation and provide an important confidence building measure in the face of escalating conflict. The Treaty reflects the authority of Pacific nations acting together and their contribution to the global non-proliferation and disarmament of nuclear weapons.
- The nuclear aspects of militarisation could be mitigated by the Treaty of Rarotonga and the Treaty's signatories could use the Treaty as a tool of international law more effectively if there is the political will to do so. This is an opportunity to review the Treaty in the context of contemporary developments such as interrogating whether "short term base rotation" including six monthly rotational visits (deployments) equate to 'stationing'.
- It is imperative that Parties uphold Article 9 of the Treaty which requires all Parties to the Treaty to report 'any significant event within its jurisdiction affecting the implementation of this Treaty' and 'keep each other informed on matters arising under or in relation to this Treaty'. Article 9 also requires PIF Secretary-General to report annually to the States Parties.
- There are critical lessons from the North Pacific. There has been a shift from strategic denial to 'strategic reclamation' in Micronesia meaning that Micronesia, including the COFA states and non-sovereign Micronesia, will play the following roles for the US: a place to deny foreign militaries from entering, a contingency or fallback plan and logistical support area for conflicts in Asia, a forward defense location, and a dispersal and spillover site. It is noted that Micronesian states are not parties to the Treaty of Rarotonga however there needs to be a mechanism developed to include them in related discussions.
- Pacific countries have sought to maximise the benefits of the current 'geopolitical moment' however Pacific Islands human and disaster security needs should not be co-opted by expedients to advance militarisation interests and capabilities. This may make it more difficult for the Blue Continent to credibly and effectively practice non-alignment. Ultimately, militarisation cannot be divorced from colonialism or the compromise of sovereignty more generally.
- Pacific Island countries will increasingly face a choice: what kind of regional order – and new world order - would be acceptable for the Pacific? How does the Pacific navigate and even shape these fundamental shifts in power, wealth and influence, including the implications for regional and national sovereignty ?

3. Crisis Management and The Ocean of Peace

- The Pacific's geopolitical importance, underscored by its vast oceanic resources and strategic location, has turned it into a stage for the world's great powers. Yet, the risk of being drawn into conflicts that are neither of their making nor aligned with their interests threatens to compromise the peace Pacific leaders have worked so hard to sustain. For the Ocean of Peace to prevail, it is imperative to reaffirm the region's commitment to peace and cooperation, acknowledging that Pacific Island nations retain agency over their individual destinies.
- Designing an institutional environment where self-interest generates positive outcomes and is aligned to collective goods will become increasingly necessary. For example, the Treaty of Rarotonga speaks of a region 'United in their commitment to a world at peace'. Pacific countries have different national security contexts and diverse – and at times competing development partners. The Ocean of Peace will require protocols for the management of tensions between national and regional interests.
- The Ocean of Peace, for the sake of logic and coherence, must be underpinned by and align with the Boe Declaration (2018), the Boe Action Plan, and the Biketawa Declaration (2000). These are the foundational security agreements which serve as the moral compass guiding the region's collective aspirations. The Ocean of Peace will therefore need to build upon this legacy, not as a mere extension, but as a transformative vision that expands these principles into new dimensions of regional solidarity and assertion. This also aligns with the UN Secretary-General's call for a new Agenda for Peace through reinvigorating diplomacy to negotiate peace and find common ground and monitoring and addressing risks such as political, economic and territorial instability that can lead to conflict.
- The Ocean of Peace is a commitment to shared responsibility. It resonates strongly with the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent, which envisions a resilient and sustainable future for the region. This strategy is not simply a roadmap; it is a call to action for Pacific nations to strengthen their collective agency in the face of external pressures, such as climate change, resource exploitation, and shifting geopolitical allegiances.
- The implementation of the Ocean of Peace will require confronting systemic challenges and strengthening Pacific - led mechanisms for action. The Pacific must assert its agency in the face of intensifying geopolitical rivalries, ensuring that regional peace frameworks are not co-opted by external powers for their strategic agendas. In this respect, it may be time to formalise a bloc of sovereign Pacific Island Countries to collectively and strategically address the adverse impacts of intensifying geopolitical rivalries.
- The success of the Ocean of Peace concept depends on its ability to add value to existing declarations and on Pacific leaders demonstrating political will and courage rather than rhetoric to commit to the principles.

Practical Measures to Advance the Ocean of Peace

Advancing the Ocean of Peace will require strengthening institutional mechanisms and governance. The Pacific Dialogue makes the following recommendations to the Pacific Islands Forum:

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- 2.** Establish pre-declared principles and protocols under a Code of Conduct to prevent and mitigate inter-state conflicts, focusing on non-aggression, territorial respect, human and environmental protection.
- 3.** Integrate civil society's justice-oriented advocacy into the Ocean of Peace to ensure that peace is not narrowly defined by state-centric or militarised frameworks.
- 4.** Leverage the Melanesian Spearhead Group, Polynesian Leaders' Group, Micronesian Presidents' Summit and other subregional groupings to operationalise Ocean of Peace principles
- 5.** Clarify how the Ocean of Peace will address the aspirations of the non-sovereign Pacific for self-determination.
- 6.** Create avenues for meaningful youth engagement to ensure their voices are heard, their ideas valued, and their leadership nurtured to cultivate a shared sense of purpose and ownership.

Next steps

1. The Pacific Dialogue Outcomes Document will be presented to the PIFS to contribute to the PIFS work on developing the draft Ocean of Peace Declaration in 2025.
2. The Pacific Dialogue will commission three papers, to be completed by mid 2025, which examine key aspects of the discussions on the Ocean of Peace:
 - a. Youth perspectives on the Ocean of Peace and self determination
 - b. An Ocean of Peace for a Contested Regional Order
 - c. A Treaty of Rarotonga Fit for the Future?
3. The Pacific Dialogue Steering Committee will convene by May 2025 to determine the focus of the 2025 Dialogue.

Pacific Dialogue Steering Committee

Sandra Tarte
James Movick
Anna Powles

Suva, January 2025

Annex 1: List of Participants

1. **Transform AQORAU**,
Vice Chancellor, University of
Solomon Islands.
2. **Nicola BAKER**,
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3. **James BHAGWAN**,
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