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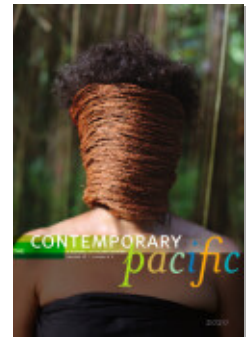
The Region in Review: International Issues and Events, 2019

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Around the Pacific, advertising agencies had a boom year in 2019 as governments rebranded their support for the Pacific Islands. Australia is “stepping up” and New Zealand “resetting” their Pacific policies. The United States launched its “Pacific pledge,” while Indonesia announced a “Pacific elevation.” China and Taiwan jostled for diplomatic support, offering “South-South” solidarity.

Despite this renewed engagement, Pacific Island citizens are grappling with a challenging international context. With the slowdown of the global economy in late 2018, many Island governments geared up for tough economic times. The adverse effects of climate change and the ongoing failure of global climate negotiations generated economic as well as environmental costs. With an increasingly hostile tone, Australia and the United States ramped up efforts to blunt Chinese influence in a region now dubbed the “Indo-Pacific.”

The policy of strategic denial in the Islands promoted by the ANZUS alliance of Australia, New Zealand, and the United States is designed to reinforce Western power in the wider Asia-Pacific region. This agenda is supported by external powers like France, India, and Japan, which all have their own regional agendas. In response, Pacific Island government and community leaders are outlining their vision of a unified, sustainable region.

Recognizing that “the world

wants Oceania like never before,” the Reclaiming Oceania Collective at the University of the South Pacific highlighted the resistance of Pacific communities: “Pacific islanders—stewards of the ocean for thousands of years—are organizing at unprecedented scales. New social movements aim to reassert an ‘oceanic’ identity, and are confronting forces that would usurp their sovereignty and heritage. Pacific islanders are also leveraging their ‘oceanic presence’ in processes of multilateral oceans diplomacy” (Reclaiming Oceania Collective 2018).

There is a growing body of research that seeks to redefine notions of regional security and development, which stress the importance of collective diplomacy, civil society engagement, and Indigenous perspectives (Fry and Tarte 2015; Salesa 2017; Fry 2019; Ratuva 2019; Morgan 2019).

In August, the annual Pacific Islands Forum meeting in Tuvalu reaffirmed the “Blue Pacific” as its key policy framework. Dame Meg Taylor, secretary-general of the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, noted: “The Blue Pacific represents our recognition that as a region, we are large, connected and strategically important” (Taylor 2019b).

The year was marked by significant engagement with the United Nations (UN), including an unprecedented regional visit by UN Secretary-General António Guterres in May, with stops in Fiji, New Zealand, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu. Guterres sees the UN Pacific Small Island Developing States (PSIDS)

group as an ally in his global advocacy on climate change. Seeking to drive momentum toward his UN Climate Action Summit in September and global climate negotiations in November, the secretary-general said that Pacific Island leaders have a unique moral authority to speak out on the climate crisis.

In May, the Forum hosted a summit with Guterres in Nadi, where he highlighted two fundamental challenges for the Pacific region: “First, the increasingly severe impacts of climate change, and second, the deepening threats to the world’s oceans and seas” (Maclellan 2019e). Following the summit, Pacific leaders issued the “Blue Pacific’s Call for Urgent Global Climate Change Action,” stressing the importance of higher ambition at the Climate Action Summit in New York (PIFS 2019a). In line with the Boe Declaration issued at the 2018 Nauru Forum, Island leaders called on the UN secretary-general to appoint a Special Adviser on Climate Change and Security (PIFS 2018).

Despite this visit, officials from the Council of Regional Organizations of the Pacific are concerned that increased UN activity in the Pacific may draw resources away from existing regional organizations. Outgoing Director-General of the Pacific Community (SPC) Dr Colin Tukuitonga noted: “We compete with UN agencies for the same pot of money and the UN has the advantage over us because of their size and global reach” (Magick 2019). After six years in the role, Tukuitonga was replaced as SPC director-general by Australian Stuart Minchin in late 2019.

Candidates also started jostling

to replace Dame Meg Taylor, whose second term at the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat ends in 2020. After Sāmoa’s Tuiloma Neroni Slade and Papua New Guinea’s Taylor, it’s Micronesia’s turn at the helm. In October, five Micronesian leaders jointly agreed to nominate Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) Ambassador to the UN Gerald Zackios as their proposed candidate for the post of secretary-general (but watch out for other players, with Cook Islands’ Prime Minister Henry Puna and former SPC Director General Jimmie Rodgers interested in applying for the post).

To improve UN support at the national level, countries like Solomon Islands and the Republic of the Marshall Islands are lobbying for formal UN offices in their capitals. However, the Cook Islands shelved its bid to become a full UN member, because its looming graduation from the status of developing country may cut off many sources of development funding. Other poor Island nations face potential loss of market access, development assistance, and concessional loans if they graduate from Least Developed Country status. Sāmoa has already graduated, with Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, Kiribati, and Tuvalu all facing the same change (Webb 2019a, 2019b).

In August, the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific reported that, on current projections, the Pacific is not on track to achieve any of the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals by 2030 (ESCAP 2019). As one example, weaknesses in public health systems were highlighted by a measles

epidemic across the region. Sāmoa was worst hit, with eighty-three deaths and 1,860 hospitalizations by year's end, but another 661 cases were reported in Tonga, Fiji, American Sāmoa, and Kiribati (WHO 2020). The new Forum chair, Prime Minister of Tuvalu Kausea Natano, stressed: "In order to prevent further outbreaks in the region, I want to ask all our Blue Pacific family to heed the advice of your Governments and health professionals, and get vaccinated as soon as possible" (PIFS 2019d).

In 2014, Sāmoa hosted the third global summit on Small Island Developing States (SIDS), with the meeting adopting a plan of action called the SIDS Accelerated Modalities of Action (SAMOA) Pathway. A PSIDS preparatory meeting in Tonga in June 2018 reviewed regional progress (PSIDS 2018), and then Forum Island countries joined the UN General Assembly (UNGA) high-level review of the SAMOA Pathway on 27 September 2019.

The success of the PSIDS group on the international stage met pushback by major powers. In August, outgoing Forum chair Nauru proposed a UNGA resolution on cooperation between the United Nations and the Pacific Islands Forum. Although adopted by the UN General Assembly in a recorded vote of 137–0, China, Russia, and Indonesia all abstained, and the United States formally expressed reservations, despite voting for the motion. It seems feathers have been ruffled by Island advocacy on climate, Taiwan, West Papua, and the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)!

After an internal brawl handed him leadership of Australia's conservative

Coalition government in 2018, Prime Minister Scott Morrison extended the "Pacific step-up," traveling to Fiji, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, and Tuvalu. He was unexpectedly returned to office after national elections on 18 May 2019 and reaffirmed regional policies largely driven by concern over rising Chinese diplomatic influence.

Beginning in July, his government extended access to the Australian labor market for Pacific workers and established the A\$2 billion Australian Infrastructure Financing Facility for the Pacific (AIFFP). In Tuvalu, Morrison announced A\$500 million in funding for Pacific resilience, disaster preparedness, and adaptation. In November, the government launched its long-delayed policy document on climate action in the Pacific (DFAT 2019).

These policies, however, have been widely critiqued. The A\$500 million pledge is not new and additional finance; rather, it will be fully drawn from Australia's shrinking overseas aid budget. The development impact of the AIFFP has been questioned by economists and nongovernmental organizations (Howes and Dornan 2019; Jubilee 2019). On climate, Australia's reputation is undercut by its low emissions reduction targets, its planned use of Kyoto carryover credits, and—matching the Trump administration—its refusal to commit new funding to the replenishment of the Green Climate Fund.

Two leading Pacific academics have criticized the security focus of Australia's "step-up," expressing "great concern about Australia's securitization of the region, evident in the deployment of military infrastructure and in the

nature of research, policy and discussions about the region, particularly in Canberra” such as the new Pacific Security College (Kabutaulaka and Teaiwa 2019). This focus has been acknowledged by Australian defense and strategic analysts, who agree that concern over China is driving renewed engagement (Dobell 2019; Herr 2019).

Pacific leaders are increasingly critical of Australian reliance on coal exports and domestic use of fossil fuels. Since its election in 2013, however, the Coalition has abolished the carbon pricing mechanism created by the previous Labor government, maintained extensive fossil fuel subsidies, and facilitated new coal mining in Queensland’s Galilee Basin. In August, Forum host Enele Sopoaga welcomed Australian financial support for climate action but didn’t mince his words on coal: “No matter how much money you put on the table, it doesn’t give you the excuse not to do the right thing—that is, cutting down your emissions, including not opening your coal mines” (Maclellan 2019d).

These policy differences led to a long and angry session at the annual Forum leaders meeting. The closed-door retreat nearly broke down twice, dragging on for nearly twelve hours as Morrison shredded the proposal statement intended for the following month’s UN Climate Action Summit. Vanuatu Foreign Minister Ralph Regenvanu described the meeting as “very fierce and very frank, and some people just didn’t want to move” (Maclellan 2019c). Other Island leaders later denounced Morrison—a first-time Forum participant—as “arrogant” and “condescending”

(Lyons 2019). Following their meeting, however, all leaders endorsed the Kainaki II Declaration for Urgent Climate Change Action Now, marking the first time the Forum has formally stated that there is a “climate change crisis” (Taylor 2019c).

At year’s end, Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Sāmoa, Vanuatu, and other Island states showed how to be a good neighbor, sending financial and material support when eastern Australia was ravaged by bushfires that killed twenty-eight people and destroyed millions of hectares of bush and farmland. Niue Premier Sir Toke Talagi summed up the new reality of climate change: “We stuffed up. All of us. It’s gonna hurt the big countries” (RNZ 2019).

The Republic of the Marshall Islands became the first country in the world to lodge a revised Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) under the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, and it promoted action through the Higher Ambition Coalition at the November Conference of the Parties in Madrid. But there were limited outcomes to celebrate from the global climate talks. Australia, Brazil, and the United States blocked progress on the use of carryover credits and accounting rules, and Forum chair Kausea Natano described the outcome as “utterly disappointing” (PIFS 2019e).

The failure of industrialized nations to pledge significant new climate funding is a serious problem, as developing countries’ Nationally Determined Contributions are often conditional on prior action by Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development nations: “No less than 136 countries

have made their NDCs partially or wholly conditional on receiving one or more types of support—climate finance for mitigation or adaptation; technology transfer; and capacity building” (Pauw and others 2019).

At the regional level, there was progress on the new Pacific Resilience Facility. At the May Forum Economic Ministers meeting in Suva, there was extensive debate over the proposed structure, although a decision was put off to allow further work. A special Forum Economic Ministers meeting reconvened in July, when all ministers—except Fiji’s—agreed to establish the Pacific Resilience Facility as an international organization. With an initial capital base of US\$1.5 billion, the organization will be housed at the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat until it is fully established, and then Sāmoa will host it.

Pacific diplomats were also active in global negotiations on oceans policy throughout the year. After the success of the first UN Ocean Conference in 2017, the Islands region has been developing its agenda for the next global conference, scheduled to be held in Portugal in June 2020.

Diplomats also joined negotiations around the conservation of marine biodiversity in areas beyond national jurisdiction (BBNJ). Formal BBNJ treaty negotiations opened in New York on 28 March, followed by a second round of talks in August. Tuvalu diplomat Fakasoa Tealei stressed that the new treaty must recognize the traditional knowledge of Indigenous peoples and their stewardship of the ocean (Tealei 2019).

This potential extension of the Law of the Sea into international waters is

a crucial opportunity for the region. In May, Forum Deputy Secretary-General Cristelle Pratt argued: “UNCLOS has been a game changer for Pacific Island Countries. It has literally transformed small island nations into large oceanic states with vast economic exclusive zones increasing their territory along with sovereign rights to resources in the ocean and the untapped potential on and below the seabed” (Pratt 2019).

There are numerous regional initiatives to develop new international maritime law, but resolving maritime boundary disputes and establishing clear baselines is slow and expensive work. Ten years ago, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, and the Federated States of Micronesia lodged a submission with the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (UNCLCS), seeking to extend their legally defined continental shelves. In June 2019, the UNCLCS finally made public its 2017 approval of the joint claim over 600,000 square kilometers (230,000 square miles) of additional seabed on the Ontong Java Plateau (UNCLCS 2017).

France’s UNCLCS bid to extend New Caledonia’s continental shelf has been used to justify its claim over Umaeneag (Matthew) and Umaenupne (Hunter) islands, which Vanuatu also claims (Vanuatu’s claim has long been supported by New Caledonia’s independence movement, FLNKS, and the Customary Senate, codified in the 2009 Keamu agreement). The latest round of negotiations between France and Vanuatu in June failed to resolve the decades-long dispute over the islands and their exclusive economic zone resources (Pacnews 2019).

Throughout the year, a series of studies highlighted: France's desire to exploit strategic metals in the exclusive economic zones of its Pacific colonies (Blue Ocean Law 2019; Lemaire 2018); the extent of collaboration between regional agencies, the International Seabed Authority, and transnational corporations to exploit ocean mineral resources (Deep Sea Mining 2019); and the need for free, prior, and informed consent for Indigenous peoples to be applied to ocean extractive industries (Aguon and Hunter 2019).

In her role as Pacific Ocean Commissioner, Dame Meg Taylor convened a meeting of the Pacific Ocean Alliance in October (PIFS 2019f). The meeting discussed fisheries, BBNJ, maritime law, and also community awareness of plastics pollution in the Pacific. Last year, the No Plastikbag Plis campaign in Vanuatu won a significant victory to stem the flow of plastic rubbish from coasts and rivers into the ocean, with Prime Minister Charlot Salwai banning single-use plastic bags, drinking straws, and Styrofoam food containers (Visser 2019). At the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme's ministerial meeting in Sāmoa in September, many other governments announced their commitment to stop the distribution of single-use plastic.

Across the region, there is significant debate over deep-sea mining. Forum Island countries have been in discussions with transnational corporations to partner in deep-sea exploration for maritime resources in their exclusive economic zones, and they are also partnering with corporations to license exploration in international

waters such as the Clarion-Clipperton zone.

Despite extensive work, early attempts to begin seabed mining have not succeeded. Under a license issued by the Papua New Guinea (PNG) government, Nautilus Minerals had planned to mine seabed minerals beneath PNG's Bismarck Sea. However, with widespread community resistance, falling share prices, and the loss of a specialized support vessel, the Nautilus project collapsed in 2019 (*The Economist* 2018; Maclellan 2019b). Many citizens want to halt or delay the exploitation of deep-sea mineral resources, and some governments are responding to the community campaign. At the Forum leaders meeting in August, Fiji Prime Minister Voreqe Bainimarama called on fellow Forum members to "support a 10-year moratorium on seabed mining from 2020 to 2030, which would allow for a decade of proper scientific research of our economic zones and territorial waters" (Maclellan 2019b).

Another crucial challenge is illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing that steals resources worth an estimated US\$23 billion annually. UN Oceans Envoy Peter Thomson of Fiji noted: "This theft is from governments, from communities, from science and from nature and we must be united in bringing this scourge to an end" (Thomson 2019).

Western rhetoric about China as a regional security threat continued to frustrate the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat at a time of US-China strategic competition, highlighted by trade disputes and tensions between Beijing, Hong Kong, and Taipei. Speaking at a February seminar in Port Vila, Secre-

tary-General Taylor said: “I reject the terms of the dilemma which presents the Pacific with a choice between a China alternative and our traditional partners. Unfortunately, this framing remains the dominant narrative in the public debate about our region in the context of today’s geostrategic competition. Such a narrative tends to portray the nations of the Pacific as passive collaborators or victims of a new wave of colonialism. In this context it is often difficult to engage in meaningful dialogue over relations with China without being labelled ‘pro-China’ or perhaps even as naïve” (Taylor 2019a; Little Red 2019b).

Regional researchers have begun to develop more nuanced analyses of China’s role. A joint project by the University of the South Pacific, the University of Hawai‘i–Mānoa, and the Australian National University commissioned research on “the China alternative” (Smith and Wesley-Smith 2020). Other studies looked at the drivers of transnational migration from China, analyzing how “new Chinese” migrants interact with “old Chinese” communities: research suggests many new Chinese migrants from Fujian province are “passing through” rather than migrating permanently (Smith 2014). A paper from the Lowy Institute questioned the extent of Chinese “debt-trap diplomacy” in the Pacific (Rajah, Dayant, and Pryce 2019), even as traditional donors began responding to the growing role of Chinese development banks (the fifty-second annual Asian Development Bank meeting was held in Nadi in May—the first time ever in a Forum Island Country).

The Pacific Islands Forum Secre-

tariat began consideration of a formal Forum-China dialogue (similar to the regular Pacific Island leaders meeting summit with Japan), with Dame Meg Taylor noting: “In general, Forum members view China’s increased actions in the region as a positive development, one that offers greater options for financing and development opportunities. . . . Forum Island countries have been excluded from the sorts of financing, technology and infrastructure that can enable us to fully engage in a globalized world. Many countries see the rise of China and its increasing interest in the region as providing an opportunity to rectify this” (Taylor 2019a).

Even though Western security analysts fret over Chinese strategic influence in the Pacific, ten of the eighteen Forum member countries—Fiji, Sāmoa, Tonga, Vanuatu, Cook Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, Kiribati, Papua New Guinea, Niue, and New Zealand—have signed memorandums of understanding to cooperate with China’s Belt and Road Initiative.

Despite their colonial status, New Caledonia and French Polynesia are also looking to China for tourism, markets, and investment (MacIellan 2020). Speaking at a seminar on China’s Maritime Silk Road in November, French Polynesian President Edouard Fritch said: “We are open to Chinese private investors, just as we were to American, French, European, Samoan or New Zealand investors in key economic sectors that open up our markets, such as tourism or aquaculture. I don’t see a difference between an American investor and a Chinese investor. If they are honest, they are

all worthy of our friendship, whatever their nationality” (Fritch 2019, 4).

However, following the lead of other transnational corporations, Chinese corporate activity is often based on corrupt payments and avoidance of environmental regulation. In Fiji, local villagers on the resort island of Malolo were aghast when a Chinese hotel project ripped out part of the reef, dumped waste, and disturbed traditional fisheries (Reid 2019). Chinese companies are harvesting timber on an unsustainable scale in Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea, with many exports avoiding taxation and environmental regulation—the two countries supply half of China’s tropical log imports (Global Witness 2018).

Beijing complements its national-level diplomacy with regional funding. In July, the Chinese government allocated US\$1.2 million to the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat under the China–Pacific Islands Forum Cooperation Fund. The annual funding has long been used for the Pacific Trade and Invest office in Beijing, but it will also contribute to initial start-up costs of the new Pacific Resilience Facility. Compared to Taiwan, the People’s Republic has a more significant program of aid across the region (Zhang 2019), and Chinese businesses are contributing to economic activity even in Taiwan-aligned Island states.

Starting the year with six partners in the region, Taiwan had lost two allies by year’s end. Solomon Islands and then Kiribati decided to break diplomatic relations with Taipei in order to establish official ties with the People’s Republic of China.

Aware of these shifting sands, the Taiwanese government tried hard in

early 2019 to bolster its partnerships. In March, President Tsai Ing-wen made an “Oceans for Democracy” tour to Palau, Nauru, and the Marshall Islands. The RMI government reaffirmed its support (RMI 2019a), and Palauan President Tommy Remengesau Jr hosted a state dinner in honor of the Taiwanese leader (Government of Palau 2019).

When Manasseh Sogavare replaced Rick Hou as prime minister of Solomon Islands in April, Sogavare vowed to review the country’s relations with Taiwan. Establishing a task force to consider the shift, there was extensive debate domestically and regionally, with opposition politicians Rick Hou, Peter Kenilorea Jr, and Premier of Malaita Daniel Suidani opposing any change (Little Red 2019a).

As the government moved to its decision, the Taiwanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs complained that they hadn’t been fully consulted: “The government of China has once again resorted to dollar diplomacy and false promises of large amounts of foreign assistance to buy off a small number of politicians, so as to ensure that the government of Solomon Islands adopted a resolution to terminate relations with Taiwan before China’s National Day on 1 October” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Taiwan 2019a, 2019b).

While the debate in Honiara played out over many weeks, the sudden decision by the government of Kiribati surprised many observers. Despite domestic concern over the change, President Taneti Maamau made a formal visit to Beijing in January 2020, meeting President Xi Jinping and signing on to the Belt and Road

Initiative. President Xi noted: “Mr. President and the Kiribati government stand on the right side of history” (Lyons 2020).

These decisions deal a blow to both Taipei’s regional and global standing as well as US diplomacy in the Pacific. A month after Tarawa’s decision, the Taiwanese and US governments cohosted a “Pacific Islands Dialogue” in Taipei for the four remaining Pacific allies: the Marshall Islands, Nauru, Palau, and Tuvalu (Lin 2019).

In September, the RMI Nitijela passed the grandiloquent resolution “extending the Republic of the Marshall Islands’ profound appreciation for the consistently staunch support of the people and government of Republic of China (Taiwan) as a true friend and allied to the Republic of the Marshall Islands individually and in the International Society generally as a reliable partner in the promotion of international peace and prosperity” (Nitijela 2019).

Following the election of Kausea Natano as Tuvalu Prime Minister in September, Taiwan’s Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Hsu Szu-chien traveled to Funafuti to shore up support. Under President Baron Waqa, Nauru remains one of Taiwan’s strongest supporters, despite the leadership change from President Baron Waqa to Lionel Aingimea after Nauru’s August elections (Aingimea conducted his first state visit in Taiwan in December).

At year’s end, with many Taiwanese citizens monitoring ongoing protests in Hong Kong, President Tsai won reelection in Taipei. This ensures the China/Taiwan dance in the Pacific will continue in coming years.

In response to China’s diplomatic successes, the United States

responded with a “Pacific Pledge” (US Department of State 2019b). Under the Pledge, the US government will commit tens of millions of dollars in additional aid, an increased security presence in some countries, and assistance with climate change disaster preparedness (US Department of State 2019a). In addition, the US Agency for International Development will expand its staff in Fiji, Papua New Guinea, the Federated States of Micronesia, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, and Palau. After a twenty-year absence from Solomon Islands, the Peace Corps will reestablish operations, although the first group of volunteers won’t arrive until mid-2021.

In a rare visit, two senior officials from the White House National Security Council toured Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Vanuatu, and Solomon Islands in March: Matt Pottinger, senior director for Asian affairs, and Alexander Gray, director for Oceania and Indo-Pacific security. The Trump administration also increased formal meetings with Pacific leaders throughout the year.

In May, for the first time ever, a sitting President of the United States held a joint meeting in the White House with the leaders of the three US Compact states: Palau’s Tommy Remengesau Jr, the Republic of the Marshall Islands’ Hilda Heine, and the Federated States of Micronesia’s David Panuelo (US Department of the Interior 2019). Their joint statement made no direct mention of climate change but included a pledge to “tackle the region’s most pressing issues, including responding to natural disasters; combating illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing; advancing eco-

conomic development; strengthening the rule of law; and supporting the resiliency of the Pacific islands environment” (White House 2019).

Later in the year, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo visited the region, including the first ever visit to the Federated States of Micronesia by a secretary of state on 5 August. US Secretary of the Interior David Bernhardt led an interagency delegation to the Forum’s Dialogue Partners meeting in August. Bernhardt stressed US action on climate change and oceans management—a sharp contrast to his predecessor Ryan Zinke, who lectured the 2018 Forum about the strategic threat from China. Pompeo followed up through a roundtable meeting with Pacific leaders on the margins of the UN General Assembly in September.

Despite the shift in rhetoric, it’s clear that Washington is driven by fear of China rather than the regional focus on climate and human security. The Trump administration formally announced the United States’ withdrawal from the Paris Agreement on Climate Change and has halted further payments to the Green Climate Fund. Despite the administration’s Pacific aid pledges, President Trump has initiated broader funding cuts to the State Department and the US Agency for International Development. The United States has also refused to ratify UNCLOS, despite the importance of international maritime law for Small Island Developing States and US rhetoric on the South China Sea.

During his August visit to Canberra, Secretary of State Pompeo stated: “The United States and Australia are neighbors, united rather than divided by the vast emptiness of Pacific waters” (Pompeo 2019).

Pompeo’s racist trope of the “empty” ocean is a classic denial of the history, heritage, and identity of Pacific Islanders. Forum Secretary-General Taylor criticized Pompeo’s comment “that stands in stark contrast to histories of Pacific people and the Blue Pacific” (Taylor 2019b).

In November, Forum Chair Kausea Natano stressed that US withdrawal from global climate action will undermine American influence and credibility in the Pacific: “Statements of friendship, expanded aid programs and high-level visits must be better backed by domestic policies and action to reduce emissions, as outlined in the Paris Agreement, in order to avert a climate catastrophe” (Matangi Tonga 2019).

In late 2018, the European Union (EU) and the African, Caribbean, and Pacific (ACP) group launched formal negotiations for a treaty to replace the 2000 Cotonou Agreement. The proposed post-Cotonou framework includes a foundation agreement and three separate regional protocols for Africa, the Caribbean, and the Pacific. In February 2019, Apia hosted an EU-ACP high-level dialogue attended by the ACP group and EU chief negotiators. In June, Pacific members of the ACP group met again to discuss the proposed Pacific-EU protocol. Ambassadors in Brussels from Sāmoa and Papua New Guinea are leading the negotiations, but hopes for an early deal were complicated by Brexit, US-China trade tensions, and divisions in the European Union. The scheduled mid-2020 treaty signing in Apia may be delayed (MacLellan 2019f).

France’s Ambassador to Fiji Sujiro Seam changed jobs to become the European Union’s ambassador for

the Pacific, highlighting France's use of the European Union to advance its own strategic interests.

As part of its push to create a post-Brexit "Global Britain," the United Kingdom has slowly commenced reengagement in the region. In 2016, then Foreign Minister Boris Johnson announced plans to open or reopen three diplomatic missions in Vanuatu, Tonga, and Sāmoa. Diplomat Karen Bell reopened the resident high commission in Port Vila in July, while Vanuatu's outgoing UK High Commissioner David Ward shifted to Sāmoa, presenting his credentials in December.

However, this new initiative is being done on the cheap. During a visit to London in January, NZ Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern agreed that British diplomats will colocate with their NZ counterparts and "utilize New Zealand's current infrastructure to make the UK's work in the region more cost-effective and collegiate" (UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office 2019). In March, NZ Foreign Minister Winston Peters announced fourteen new diplomatic posts in seven Pacific countries (Sāmoa, Tonga, Fiji, Vanuatu, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, and Kiribati), while Australia is establishing new missions in the Republic of the Marshall Islands, French Polynesia, Niue, and Cook Islands.

The Commonwealth of Nations (mostly former British colonial possessions) marked its seventieth anniversary in 2019, with eleven Forum states among its fifty-three members (Australia, Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Sāmoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu).

The UK government is using long-standing regional attachment to the

House of Windsor as a diplomatic tool across the Pacific Commonwealth states. In 2018, just three days after the media furor over a purported Chinese military base in Vanuatu, Prince Charles and then Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop visited Port Vila aboard a Royal Australian Air Force plane. In October that year, the Duke and Duchess of Sussex toured Oceania to promote the Invictus Games for injured servicemen and women. During his visit to Fiji, however, Prince Harry made no mention of Fiji's nuclear veterans, who are suffering health impacts from their military service during the 1950s British nuclear testing program in Kiribati (Maclellan 2018). In November 2019, the Prince of Wales made his first visit to Solomon Islands, making a speech in pidgin and launching a new ocean conservation initiative and a malaria elimination roadmap.

The largest Commonwealth member, India, has also pledged support for the Pacific. New Delhi is being wooed by ANZUS as a counterweight to China, and think tanks suggest that Indian naval forces could play an enhanced role in the Pacific Ocean as well as the Indian Ocean. However, the suggestion that "India's maritime disposition seems to envisage having command of the sea in the Indo-Pacific" (Chandramohan 2018) is farcical, given the scale of US and Chinese deployments. New Delhi only has permanent diplomatic missions in Suva and Port Moresby, relying on High Commissions in Canberra and Wellington for regional outreach.

Following the reelection of Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party in May elections, the Indian Prime Minister hosted a meeting with

Pacific delegations on the sidelines of the UNGA debate in September. Modi pledged a US\$1 million grant to each of the twelve PSIDS members, as well as a US\$150 million concessional line of credit for renewable energy and climate projects (Chaudhury 2019). Modi also announced a third Forum on India and Pacific Island Countries, to be held in Papua New Guinea in 2020.

While UK and Indian action in the Pacific has been slow in coming, the administration of Indonesian President Joko “Jokowi” Widodo has poured in resources to intensify its diplomatic engagement with Pacific Island countries (Takinana 2019). Its primary objectives include preventing the relisting of West Papua on the UN list of non-self-governing territories and blocking full membership of the United Liberation Movement for West Papua in the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG).

Indonesia’s diplomacy advanced when it gained MSG associate membership in 2015. This regional foothold has enabled Jakarta to exert political influence on governments in Fiji and Papua New Guinea, even as community support for West Papua has grown. Responding to the West Papua solidarity movement, diplomats have mobilized Indonesian students in regional universities, while Indonesian Internet trolls have bombarded journalists and West Papuan activists on social media. As leading Pacific scholar Tarcisius Kabutaulaka has argued, “Jakarta is determined to quell discussions about West Papua amongst Pacific islanders” (2020).

In March, the Indonesian government hosted the first ever Indonesia–South Pacific Forum in Jakarta,

launching a new engagement program dubbed “Pacific Elevation.” Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi stated: “Indonesians and the people in countries of the South Pacific belong to one family. We call the Pacific Ocean our home” (Marsudi 2019). Indonesia’s Ambassador to New Zealand Tantowi Yahya was later named as new roving ambassador to the Pacific.

Worried that China and Singapore are surging exports into Pacific markets, Jakarta is seeking closer trade ties with larger island states. In July, the Indonesian government hosted a Pacific Exposition trade fair in Auckland, proposing Preferential Trade Agreements with Fiji and Papua New Guinea. Indonesia also aims to establish an overseas aid organization, planning a US\$1 billion trust fund that might distribute US\$60 million annually to Forum island countries. Even before this formal structure, Indonesia is running seven small aid programs in Fiji, Solomon Islands, Nauru, Tuvalu, and Kiribati and in July signed new agreements with Cook Islands and Niue (Massola and Rompies 2019).

At a time when “Indo-Pacific” is replacing “Asia-Pacific” as a geopolitical concept, the Jokowi administration highlights Indonesia’s strategic location at the junction of the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Jakarta seeks to expand maritime transport connections into Melanesia as part of its “Maritime Fulcrum Vision” for the Indo-Pacific region. This policy was reconfirmed at the Indonesia–South Pacific Forum by Foreign Minister Marsudi: “As Indonesia’s Global Maritime Fulcrum initiative takes shape, we have expanded and upgraded strategic ports in the eastern part of the country. Our aim is

to establish greater sea connectivity, which will bring Indonesia closer to the South Pacific” (Marsudi 2019).

Despite this effort, increased Indonesian human rights violations in West Papua during 2019 sparked anger from island leaders. Thousands of West Papuans fled Indonesian police and military operations in Nduga district following the shooting of Indonesian road construction workers in December 2018.

At the Forum in Tuvalu, leaders reaffirmed Indonesia’s sovereignty over the two provinces of Papua and West Papua but acknowledged reports of escalating violence and human rights abuses in Nduga. In their final communiqué, leaders “agreed to re-emphasize and reinforce the Forum’s position of raising its concerns over the violence.” Against pressure from Indonesia’s partners in the Forum, Vanuatu defended wording that “strongly encouraged” Jakarta to facilitate a long-mooted visit by UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet, calling for “an evidence-based, informed report on the situation” to be published before the 2020 Forum in Port Vila (PIFS 2019b).

A further upsurge in conflict began in Surabaya later in August, prompted by West Papuan student protests against Indonesian racism. Thousands of Papuan students across Indonesia launched mass demonstrations, which soon expanded into street protests in West Papua. As Papuans clashed with Indonesian migrants, police and military responded with violence and arrests, shooting West Papuan protesters in Jayapura and Wamena (MacLellan 2019h).

In response, Forum Secretary-General Dame Meg Taylor stressed: “I am deeply concerned about the situation in West Papua, and I call for calm and restraint by all parties. We reiterate our calls for all parties to protect and uphold the human rights of all residents and to work to address the root causes of the conflict by peaceful means. . . . I repeat the recent call by Forum leaders in Tuvalu for the parties to finalize the timing for a mission of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to West Papua” (PIFS 2019c).

Jakarta is also concerned that West Papua is being compared to self-determination struggles in New Caledonia and Bougainville. Their respective referenda on self-determination in 2018 and 2019 both involved extensive popular participation, in sharp contrast to the so-called Act of Free Choice in 1969, when the Indonesian military handpicked 1,022 Papuans and forced them to vote for annexation. In 2019, human rights lawyers filed an application to the Indonesian Constitutional Court on behalf of West Papua customary leaders and churches, seeking a judicial review of the Act of Free Choice (Tapol 2019).

For two weeks starting on 23 November, the Autonomous Region of Bougainville voted in a referendum to choose between an independent and sovereign state or greater autonomy within Papua New Guinea. The referendum was the culmination of the Bougainville Peace Agreement, signed in August 2001 between the PNG government and key leaders from Bougainville.

Studies of the path to the referendum were prepared by the Bougain-

ville Referendum Research Project of the PNG National Research Institute (NRI 2019); PNG legal experts (Kama 2019); and Anthony Regan, a key advisor to the Autonomous Bougainville Government (Regan 2019). Journalist Ben Bohane argued that “neighbors like Australia and Solomon Islands must navigate a policy response that acknowledges the history of conflict and colonialism, Bougainville nationalism, PNG sensitivities, the principles of the guiding Bougainville Peace Agreement and new geostrategic realities to help forge a lasting solution” (Bohane 2019).

Before the vote, there was concern over the reaction of affected communities and demobilized veterans of the conflict between 1989 and 1998, whose reconciliation is an unfinished legacy of the Bougainville war (Conciliation Resources 2019). In November, a series of customary meetings brought together members of the PNG Defense Force, PNG police, and former combatants of the Bougainville Revolutionary Army. In Arawa, Kokopo, and other locations, there were ceremonies involving the sharing of betel nut, breaking of bows and arrows, and planting of coconut trees for peace.

This Melanesian-style reconciliation has relevance for communities across conflict zones in Bougainville, New Caledonia, West Papua, and Solomon Islands. As New Caledonia commemorated the thirtieth anniversary of the deaths of Jean-Marie Tjibaou, Yeiwene Yeiwene, and Djubelli Wea on 4 May, Tjibaou’s son Emmanuel proposed that lessons from these customary traditions could be shared across Melanesia (Maclellan 2019g).

As in New Caledonia, the Bougainville referendum came at a time of major debate about economic options for the independent nation (Maclellan and Regan 2018). Major mining companies are maneuvering to gain exploration licenses and even to revive the giant Panguna mine that was at the heart of Bougainville’s decade-long war (Danckert and Bohane 2019).

With 206,731 eligible voters for Bougainville’s referendum, there was a strong turnout and an overwhelming result, with 97.7 percent in support of independence and just 2.3 percent calling for greater autonomy. But even with majority support for independence, the referendum is not binding. The issue of political status now passes to lengthy consultations between the PNG and Bougainville governments, with a final decision to be made by the PNG Parliament. Despite this, the overwhelming support for independence leaves limited room for Papua New Guinea (and Australia) to ignore the wishes of the people.

Following their December 2018 meeting in Paris, the French government and New Caledonian political leaders agreed to hold a second referendum on self-determination under the provisions of the Nouméa Accord (Fisher 2019). The independence coalition Front de Libération Nationale Kanak et Socialiste (FLNKS) is seeking to maintain momentum from its 2018 referendum campaign, which saw 43 percent of voters supporting a “yes” vote for independence (Maclellan 2019i).

As well as sending referendum monitors, the Forum maintained its tradition of election monitoring in 2019, with teams traveling to Solo-

mon Islands (April), New Caledonia (May), Nauru (August), and the Marshall Islands (November). The May elections for New Caledonia's three provincial assemblies and national congress set the terrain for the next referendum and more regional debate on France's role as a colonial power. Incoming New Caledonian President Thierry Santa attended his first Pacific Islands Forum in August, just weeks after his election by the Government of New Caledonia (Maclellan 2019a).

Human rights debates were driven by national, donor, and community initiatives. By 123 to 121 votes, the Marshall Islands beat Iraq to win a competitive election to the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva for a three-year term starting January 2020. RMI Foreign Minister John Silk noted: "Maybe we didn't have chocolates to give out, but we did have our story to bring to the world. . . . We are also unafraid to take strong stands in the world, where it is needed" (RMI 2019b). The Republic of the Marshall Islands joins Australia and Fiji, who currently serve on the forty-seven-member council.

Despite this, many Pacific governments are still failing on their human rights obligations: ending the scourge of violence against women and children in the home, community, and workplace; protecting prisoners, asylum seekers, and people living with disabilities; guaranteeing the rights of deportees from Pacific Rim countries; or protecting freedom of the press.

The pressure on media workers was highlighted in November by the case of Dan McGarry (Garrett 2019). The Canadian-born managing editor of the *Vanuatu Daily Post* was barred from

returning to Port Vila from Brisbane after his newspaper published stories about China that angered the Vanuatu government. Ironically, McGarry was in Australia attending a Melanesia Media Freedom Forum! McGarry was eventually allowed to return to Port Vila to rejoin his ni-Vanuatu family and resolve his visa status, but the creation of the Melanesia Media Freedom Forum reflects the need to increase transnational cooperation among journalists, editors, and publishers at a time of increasing media repression in Melanesia (MMFF 2019).

The most inspiring transnational initiative in 2019 was the student climate strike movement. In September, primary and secondary students across the Pacific Islands mobilized as part of a global youth uprising for urgent climate action. In Melbourne, as a hundred thousand people marched through the streets, Pacific Climate Warriors and Indigenous youth were given pride of place in the front rank. Young Australians understand that the Pacific is on the frontline of the climate emergency, even if their Prime Minister does not. The debate will continue at Forum 2020 in Port Vila.

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