

## Political Reviews

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*The Region in Review: International Issues and Events, 2017*

NIC MACLELLAN

*Melanesia in Review: Issues and Events, 2017*

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It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.

In 2017, Pacific collective diplomacy reached new heights, with Island nations campaigning on the oceans, climate change, and nuclear disarmament through the Pacific Small Island Developing States (PSIDS). Fiji completed its presidency of the UN General Assembly, cohosted the first global conference on the oceans, and took up the presidency of COP23—the 23rd Conference of the Parties of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change.

At the same time, the US administration under President Donald Trump announced—often through tweets—policies on climate change, nuclear weapons, and maritime law that rolled back the achievements of years of patient international diplomacy. With uncertainty over the post-2020 relationship with the European Union, growing Chinese power, and adverse climate policies from Canberra, it was a difficult year for Pacific regionalism.

As the Pacific Community (SPC) marked its 70th anniversary, key regional initiatives—from RAMSI to PACER-Plus negotiations—came to an end. At the same time, regional organizations struggled with their attitude toward independence for the remaining Pacific territories.

The central theme of the September 2017 Forum leaders' meeting was "The Blue Pacific—Our Sea of Islands." Drawing together regional priorities on the oceans, climate

change, security, and fisheries, the theme echoed the vision of the late Epeli Hau'ofa by lauding the interconnections of the liquid continent (Waddell, Naidu, and Hau'ofa 1993).

At the Forum's opening ceremony in Apia, host Prime Minister Tuilaepa Sailele Malielegaoi said: "The Blue Pacific provides a new narrative for Pacific regionalism and how the Forum engages with the world. It will require a different way of working together that prioritizes The Blue Pacific as the core driver of Forum policymaking and collective action" (Tuilaepa 2017a).

Throughout 2017, Pacific governments promoted the Blue Pacific agenda on the international stage. Holding the presidency of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in 2016–2017—an unprecedented achievement for an Island nation—Fiji's Ambassador Peter Thomson used his position to raise international awareness of regional concerns. Completing his ambassadorship in September, Thomson was appointed as the first UN special envoy for the ocean by UN Secretary-General António Guterres.

Action around the oceans was a central regional priority. Secretary-General of the Pacific Islands Forum Dame Meg Taylor, who also serves as Pacific Oceans commissioner, noted: "A healthy Pacific Ocean means a prosperous Pacific people. The ocean is integral to our cultures, well-being and economic growth" (*Fiji Sun* 2017).

In 2015, as the United Nations adopted seventeen new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Pacific governments successfully pushed for a specific goal on the oceans and seas. SDG14 pledges action to “conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development” (UN 2017a).

To implement SDG14, Fiji and Sweden cohosted the high-level UN Conference on the Oceans and Seas in New York in June 2017. This conference issued a call for action, highlighting action on ocean acidification, plastics, and overfishing. By the end of the conference, 1,328 voluntary commitments had been registered by governments, UN bodies, nongovernment organizations, private corporations, and others, far exceeding expectations. Pacific governments now hope to update the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) through talks on a new agreement on conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity in areas beyond national jurisdictions.

The Oceans Conference also provided a platform to draw attention to Pacific fisheries policy. Director General of the Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA) James Movick noted: “More than any other UN Conference, this is one event where the Pacific nations are coming to demonstrate their global leadership of the issue on the table. They are coming to talk Oceans, and the Pacific lessons and achievements when it comes to sustainable tuna fisheries management” (*Fiji Sun* 2017).

But this cooperation is complicated by the influence of Distant Water Fishing Nations (DWFN) and colonial powers in the region like the

United States and France. The 2016 decision to include French Polynesia and New Caledonia as full members of the Forum has raised difficult issues for agencies in the Council of Regional Organizations of the Pacific (CROP), in some of which France is not a member. Some fisheries officials have raised concern that confidential positions on the management and conservation of tuna have been compromised with the effective inclusion of France—through its Pacific collectivities—as an FFA member (MacLellan 2018).

Transform Aqorau, the former chief executive officer of the Parties to the Nauru Agreement (PNA), expressed concern over France’s new influence: “I know that the FFA membership is deeply concerned about the implications of sharing the same room with France in Pacific Island tuna discussions, and this issue was discussed at great lengths at the recent Pacific Fisheries Ministers’ meeting in the Gold Coast. . . . there is now a perception that the FFA’s position has been compromised” (Pareti 2017).

PNA held their annual officials meeting in April in Majuro and a ministerial meeting in July in Queensland. PNA chief executive officer Ludwig Kumoru said that the organization’s priority remains adding value to fisheries and increasing revenues for Island nations. Revenue to the Islands from the purse seine skipjack fishery has increased from nearly US\$60 million in 2010 to US\$400 million in 2016 (FFA 2017a). Despite these economic benefits, fish stocks are under pressure as DWFN expand their operations, although the latest report card on fisheries assessed that the bigeye

tuna stock is not overfished, as previously reported (FFA 2017b, 2).

Throughout 2017, despite headwinds blowing from Washington and Canberra, Pacific Island nations sailed ahead to address the adverse effects of climate change.

Announcing an A\$6 million (US\$4.7 million) grant and key staff to the secretariat in Suva that managed preparations for COP23, Australian Senator Concetta Fierravanti-Wells said: “We are at the coal face here in the Pacific of dealing with issues consequent to climate events” (*Pacific Beat* 2017). It was an unfortunate choice of words, since many Pacific Islanders are hoping that Australia will step away from the coal face!

As Australian Ambassador for Climate Change Patrick Suckling visited Suva in February for bilateral talks with the Bainimarama government, the Pacific Islands Climate Action Network (PICAN) issued an open letter challenging Australia’s plans for new coal mines and exports (PICAN 2017). In May, President Hilda Heine of the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) was openly critical of Australian climate policy in a speech in Canberra: “Now is not the time to be debating the science, trashing solar power, or building new coal mines. . . . I can assure you it does influence the way Australia is viewed in the Pacific” (Heine 2017).

In June, Fiji, Marshall Islands, Tuvalu, and other nations also criticized President Trump’s decision to pull out of the Paris Agreement on Climate Change. Fiji Prime Minister Voreqe Bainimarama called the decision “deeply disappointing for the citizens of vulnerable nations through-

out the world” (Bainimarama 2017). Tuvalu’s Enele Sopoaga also noted: “It is simple arrogance, meaning at the end of the day, it’s the money issue that is driving climate change” (Qounadovu 2017).

Throughout the year, Island states coordinated their efforts in the lead-up to the annual global climate negotiations. With Prime Minister Bainimarama absent from the Forum leaders’ meeting in September, Fiji’s Ambassador Amena Yauvoli hosted a sidebar event to discuss regional priorities for COP23. The Pacific Climate Change Roundtable, held on 4–5 October, announced a center of excellence for Pacific climate action in Apia, at the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP) campus. The Pacific Climate Change Centre will serve as the Pacific Meteorological Council’s primary training and partnership provider for the region. The 2017 Pre-COP Ministerial Dialogue was then held in Nadi on 17–18 October.

The culmination of all this preparation came in November, as Fiji presided over COP23 in Bonn, Germany—the first time a Pacific Island nation had played that role.

Despite raising the profile of Fiji and the Pacific, COP23 saw major setbacks for some key regional priorities. Analysts noted that “the final decision on Loss and Damage is hopelessly weak” and the outcome of the climate finance negotiations “were predictably unremarkable” (Schalatek, Fuhr, and Lehr 2017). Over the next year, Fiji will continue in the COP presidency, opening the way for a 2018 “Talanoa Dialogue” to feed into the 2019 COP, “which will hopefully build enhanced

trust to increase ambition for both mitigation and support in the post-2020 period” (Schalatek, Fuhr, and Lehr 2017).

In Bonn, there was also frank discussion about keeping coal and other fossil fuels in the ground in order to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. A new alliance of twenty nations committed to moving away from burning coal. This “Powering Past Coal Alliance” included Fiji, France, the Marshall Islands, Niue, and New Zealand—but not Australia—as founding members (Morgan 2017).

Former President of Kiribati Anote Tong and François Martel of the Pacific Islands Development Forum (PIDF) both signed the Lofoten Declaration, a high-level call to constrain oil, gas, and coal production. Tong noted: “Fossil fuels will destroy our home. Two degrees will destroy our home” (Feagaimaali‘i-Luamanu 2017). Speaking in Bonn, he added: “If you’re going to open another coal mine then you are not transitioning [to renewables], you are lying to us” (SBS 2017).

For all of these items on the Blue Pacific agenda—oceans, fisheries, climate change, and maritime security—the influence and appetites of powerful partners complicated the agenda for Pacific Island governments. As in recent years, 2017 was marked by jostling between international players, many of whom import their own disputes into Pacific regional organizations.

This problem has particularly been exacerbated by the incoherence of policy coming out of Washington. The Trump administration seeks to contain China but abandoned a central

pillar of the Obama administration’s containment policy—the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement. Threatening “fire and fury” against the people of Korea, Trump sought support from Pacific allies to pressure the Kim Jong-un regime on nuclear proliferation. But a year after taking office, the Trump administration had not even nominated US ambassadors to South Korea or Australia, key regional allies in the quest to contain Kim. The US delegation to the 48th Pacific Islands Forum was led by Susan Thornton, acting assistant secretary for East Asia and the Pacific. However, Thornton was only nominated to the US Senate five days before Christmas 2017, delaying confirmation for this key posting covering Asia-Pacific hotspots.

Pacific regional governance was also affected by the outcomes of national elections and no-confidence motions. A number of politicians returned to office in 2017, including Papua New Guinea’s Peter O’Neill, Tonga’s ‘Akilisi Pōhiva, Niue’s Toke Talagi, and New Caledonia’s Philippe Germain. There were also new faces in leadership. In New Zealand, Labour’s new Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern replaced National Party leadership under John Key and Bill English (Ardern will become the first Forum leader to give birth while in office, after announcing an unexpected pregnancy). In Solomon Islands, former Reserve Bank Governor Rick Houenipwela won power in a November no-confidence motion, replacing Manasseh Sogavare.

In 2016–2017, the regional agencies reviewed the CROP Charter. First created in 2012, this charter guides regional institutional coordination and

collaboration in an attempt to limit long-running turf wars between CROP members.

The Forum Secretariat also undertook internal reviews, including an analysis of governance and financing, a review of Forum meetings, and an overview “State of Pacific Regionalism Report 2017.” With Australia and New Zealand providing the bulk of the secretariat’s core funding, the task of developing a new funding strategy—with the independence that implies—becomes all the more important. Forum Secretary-General Taylor noted: “We’ve completed a strategic framework for the Secretariat and are very conscious that our first priority has to be people-centered development. We need to ensure that there is not just physical security, but also food security and environmental security for people in our region” (Maclellan 2017e).

Taylor also serves as chair of the CROP, which met in Honiara in February and reaffirmed the Framework for Pacific Regionalism (FPR) as a key mechanism for policy development. In late 2017, the Forum Secretariat reopened the process for public submissions to determine new FPR priorities.

The Pacific Community (SPC) Committee of Representatives of Governments and Administrations met in July in Nouméa, marking seventy years since the regional technical agency was created as the South Pacific Commission. To highlight the 70th anniversary, SPC celebrated the life and achievements of seventy astounding Pacific women in the lead-up to the 13th Triennial Conference of Pacific Women in October.

Other regional agencies suffered internal challenges. The PIDF faced funding problems as Fiji diverted resources to its international diplomatic initiatives. The Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) resolved an internal staffing dispute, after the Vanuatu Supreme Court cleared MSG Director General Amena Yauvoli of any wrongdoing over the dispute (MSG 2017). Yauvoli later faced further whispers as he took up a key role in COP23 preparations on behalf of Fiji, leading to lengthy absences from the MSG Secretariat in Port Vila.

At a time of changing patterns of Official Development Assistance (ODA) and climate finance, donor funding remains a core concern. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) officially determined that the Cook Islands will graduate to developed country status in late 2018, removing it from the OECD Development Advisory Committee list of countries eligible for ODA (OECD 2017). Other countries also face graduation to high-income status in coming years, including Palau, Niue, Nauru, Wallis and Futuna, the Marshall Islands, Fiji, and Tonga, all of which are listed on the OECD list of upper middle income ODA recipients.

The Trump administration also refused to provide a further US\$2 billion that was pledged to the Green Climate Fund (GCF) by former US President Barack Obama, even as Pacific leaders were already decrying the bureaucracy that limits access to the GCF and other funding mechanisms. In frustration, Kiribati President Taneti Maamau told the UNGA: “Access to climate financing, like the

Green Climate Fund, takes too long to process and disburse. We simply cannot afford to wait any longer. . . . With the approval of Parliament, my Government is leveraging our sovereign wealth fund as collateral for concessional debt financing. This is a move beyond tradition but we would rather take the initiative to drive our own aspirations and deliver to our people than to wait on financial assistance that may come at a moment far too late” (Maamau 2017).

US climate vandalism has opened the way for France to step up as a champion of climate action in the Pacific. Sebastian Lecornu, secretary of state to the minister for the ecological and inclusive transition in the Emmanuel Macron administration, led the French delegation to the 2017 Forum leaders’ meeting.

Lecornu stressed the significance of improved relations between France and Forum member countries and encouraged participation in President Macron’s “One Planet” global climate summit, held in Paris in December: “If the door to the Forum is open, it’s because the policies taken up by the President of the Republic Emmanuel Macron, the head of State, have created a longing for France. This is because there are a number of large nations which address the issue of climate change and global warming, but without as much enthusiasm, as much energy and maybe even courage as France” (Lecornu 2017).

Australia remains the largest aid, trade, and military power in the South Pacific, providing nearly A\$1 billion (US\$780.4 million) in ODA to the Islands each year. But in recent times, the country’s standing has been

damaged by policies that adversely affect neighboring islands: the ongoing commitment to expanded coal exports at a time when Pacific governments are seeking reduced use of fossil fuels; the expensive and unresolved warehousing of asylum seekers and refugees on Manus and Nauru; cutbacks to Radio Australia, including the January 2017 closure of shortwave broadcasting to isolated rural communities; the abolition of AusAID as an independent statutory organization; and the gutting of the overseas aid program, slashed to the lowest ratio of gross national income ever recorded.

Strategic studies academic Joanne Wallis stated that Australia’s “preponderant material power does not necessarily translate into effective levers of influence, that is, effective tools of coercion, inducement or persuasion” over Forum Island countries (2017, 5). She argued that Australia’s “role as an alliance partner and local franchisee of the Western brand” limits its influence, at a time of diplomatic activism by Pacific states and growing activity by China, Indonesia, and India (Wallis 2017, 255).

In response to this paradox of extensive power but declining influence, 2017 witnessed a renewed verbal assertiveness from Canberra, criticizing Chinese influence in domestic and regional politics. This was amplified as Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull extended collaboration with the Trump administration over maritime disputes in the South China Sea and North Korean nuclear proliferation. Australia also promoted increased quadrilateral coordination with the United States, Japan, and India to contain China, even though Canberra



denies this is the objective of its strategic partnerships.

At the 2016 Forum leaders' meeting in Pohnpei, Prime Minister Turnbull committed to a "step change" in Australia's engagement with the Islands (Turnbull 2016). In August 2017, Foreign Minister Julie Bishop outlined this change in a major speech on Pacific policy in Suva. She pledged to strengthen partnerships with Forum Island countries in three areas: "for economic growth . . . for our security . . . and to support relationships between our people" (Bishop 2017). At the 2017 Forum in Apia the following month, Turnbull announced a suite of initiatives, including a Pacific Labour Scheme for smaller Island states and efforts to reduce the cost of remittances from Australia to the Pacific.

This was followed in November by the release of a major Foreign Policy White Paper, which highlights growing Chinese influence in the Indo-Pacific region and calls for enhanced engagement between Australia and the Pacific Islands. According to the white paper, "The stability and economic progress of Papua New Guinea, other Pacific island countries and Timor-Leste is of fundamental importance to Australia" (Australian Government 2017, 99). Australia's approach to the region is based on "helping to integrate Pacific countries into the Australian and New Zealand economies and our security institutions, [as] essential to the long-term stability and economic prospects of the Pacific" (Australian Government 2017, 8).

Even so, a central element of this economic integration, the PACER-Plus trade agreement (an outcome of the

2001 Pacific Agreement on Closer Economic Relations [PACER]) was not even mentioned in the white paper's chapter on the Pacific. After nearly two decades of preparation and seven years of negotiations, PACER-Plus arrived in June with a dull thud, at a signing ceremony in Nuku'alofa.

After initially refusing to sign the treaty in Tonga, Vanuatu Prime Minister Charlot Salwai later signed at a ceremony on the fringes of the Pacific Islands Forum in September. By year's end, however, Papua New Guinea and Fiji had refused to sign the treaty. This decision by the largest Island trading nations is a sign that there is a need for more creative initiatives to promote trade and investment, at a time of growing protectionist measures among OECD countries.

When negotiations started in 2009, politicians from Australia and New Zealand stressed that PACER-Plus was different from standard free trade deals and would be development focused. The Office of the Chief Trade Advisor (OCTA) tried to highlight the benefits of the treaty for Forum Island countries (OCTA 2017), but post-signing analysis of the deal has highlighted the lack of ambition, the failure to lock in labor market access in the binding treaty, and the disproportionate benefits for Australia and New Zealand. Most commentators were dismissive, with headlines such as "Disappointment and Lost Opportunity" (Gay 2017) and "Not Much to Celebrate" (Dornan 2017).

Former Forum Secretary-General Sir Noel Levi, who guided the initial drafting of the Pacific Island Countries Trade Agreement and PACER in the late 1990s, was scathing over



the outcome of “PACER Minus.” He decried the lack of leadership by his successors for not addressing objections raised by Fiji and Papua New Guinea: “I question why those at the helm of Pacific regional organizations did not take heed of the seriousness of domestic policy and politics. . . . It was obvious that their governments were not interested in any regional agreement that, in their view, carried the interests of Australia and New Zealand above theirs” (Levi 2017, 20).

Despite PACER’s weaknesses, Australia’s Seasonal Worker Program (SWP) and New Zealand’s Recognized Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme boomed in 2017, even after publicity over the deaths of twelve seasonal workers and cases of exploitation by employers (Maclellan 2017f). Expanding from horticulture into the agricultural and accommodation sectors, numbers to Australia jumped by 37 percent in 2016–2017 to 6,166 seasonal workers. By year’s end, the World Bank had prepared a major new study with recommendations to expand the SWP (World Bank 2018).

Australian engagement with the region is often framed as a policy of strategic denial against non-Western powers. Following concerns that Chinese corporation Huawei might build an Internet cable to Solomon Islands, Turnbull intervened to block the deal. This led to the signing of a bilateral security treaty between Australia and Solomon Islands in August. The next month, there were further bilateral memoranda of understanding on security partnerships with Tuvalu and Nauru. Australia has also committed A\$2 billion (US\$1.6 billion) to

the Pacific Maritime Security Program over the next thirty years to provide nineteen replacement patrol boats across the Pacific.

Shadow Defence Minister Richard Marles from the opposition Australian Labor Party also called for increased engagement by Australia in the Islands in a major speech to the Lowy Institute on 21 November. Marles argued that the “cornerstone” for renewed Pacific engagement “is a far more extensive and deeper defence relationship with those countries which have a defence force. . . . it would benefit us to see the capability of the Pacific Island Countries’ defence forces grow” (Marles 2017). This is a worrying priority for those Pacific citizens who faced human rights abuses by military and police forces during the Bougainville war or the coups in Fiji.

In government, Marles was an active supporter of French colonialism in the Pacific, viewing France as a stable democratic partner against Chinese influence (Maclellan 2012). Following the 2016 decision to extend full Forum membership to New Caledonia and French Polynesia, Canberra and Paris signed a “Joint Statement of Enhanced Strategic Partnership between Australia and France” in March, extending an existing 2012 declaration. The decision by the Turnbull government to award a contract worth A\$50 billion (US\$39 billion) to the French corporation Naval Group (formerly DCNS) to build the next generation of submarines for the Royal Australian Navy has reinforced this global strategic engagement (Carroll and Ell 2017).

In the past, there were few alternatives to reliance on the ANZUS

(Australia, New Zealand, and the United States) allies, Japan, and the European Union for trade, aid, and investment. Now there are a range of new partners in the region—major powers like China, India, and Indonesia, and smaller, agile donors from Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. In contrast to existing Western donors, China has emphasized its identity as a South-South development partner, with a common identity as a developing nation (Zhang and Lawson 2017, 198).

China stands out as the dominant strategic challenge for ANZUS in the Islands region. Forum Trade Commissioner to China David Morris said the Pacific governments were open to dialogue with China because of lack of support from traditional partners: “There’s no doubt Australia doesn’t think much about its neighborhood and the neighborhood knows that” (Martin 2017).

This tension was highlighted in a diplomatic spat between Beijing and Canberra in January 2018. Concetta Fierravanti-Wells, Australia’s minister for international cooperation and the Pacific, made front-page headlines when she criticized Chinese aid projects in the Pacific, accusing China of “duchessing” Pacific leaders and officials. Criticizing “roads to nowhere” built by China, she said: “You’ve got the Pacific full of these useless buildings which nobody maintains, which are basically white elephants” (Riordan 2018, 1).

In response, Chinese diplomats lodged an official diplomatic complaint. Xu Haijing, Australian correspondent for *Xinhua*, polemicized: “If Australia really cares about its Pacific

neighbors, it should first learn from China to treat those much smaller neighbors as equals and refrain from behaving like an arrogant overlord. The Australian government’s ‘default policy’ for all issues is to blame China” (Xu 2018).

Samoa’s prime minister openly criticized Fierravanti-Wells’s comments: “They are quite insulting to the leaders of the Pacific Island nations. To me as Chairman of the Pacific Leaders Forum, the comments question the integrity, wisdom and intelligence of the leaders of the Pacific Islands to judge what is good for our own people. These types of comments can damage the excellent relationships that exist between Australia and the Pacific Island countries, particularly Samoa” (*Samoa Observer* 2018).

Chinese outreach had a successful year. In March 2017, Forum Secretary-General Taylor led a Forum trade delegation to Beijing, Guangzhou, and Hainan Province, promoting investment and trade opportunities in the Islands. She met with China’s Minister for Foreign Affairs Wang Yi to discuss ongoing support for mechanisms that link the People’s Republic and the Islands region: the Pacific Trade and Invest Office in Beijing, the China-PIFS Development Cooperation Fund, and the PIF-China Scholarship Programme (PIFS 2017a).

With three pages printed in Chinese in the official handbook at the Apia Forum leaders’ meeting, it wasn’t hard to notice China’s influence in regional affairs. At the September Forum, Beijing provided twenty vehicles to transport the heads of government around Apia, and there was a major seminar on Chinese trade and investment in the

Forum venue (with support from just six Forum members, Taiwan hosted a dinner for its supporters away from the hotel).

At the 19th Communist Party of China National Congress in October, President Xi Jinping announced, “China will increase assistance to other developing countries, especially the least developed countries, and do its part to reduce the North-South development gap” (Xi 2017). Under President Xi, China’s centerpiece for international development is the One Belt, One Road Initiative, potentially the largest infrastructure program in history.

While the project is more focused on Central Asia, the Middle East, and Europe, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is also being extended to the Pacific Islands. China analyst Nick Bisley noted that the BRI has four broad aims: “to build connectivity; develop China’s hinterlands; export surplus capital and capacity; and increase Chinese strategic influence. Indeed, the Chinese government insists that the program is not limited to the already vast purview of Eurasia—any country in the world can take part” (Bisley 2017).

Chinese investment and loans are facilitated through the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, China Exim Bank, and state-supported corporations. Forum Trade Commissioner to China David Morris said: “China has enormous financial capacity to support economic development. It has now a private sector that is very actively looking for investment opportunities and it has a very fast growing outbound tourism market as well” (RNZI 2017a).

Along with ministerial representatives from Vanuatu, Samoa, and Tonga, Fiji Prime Minister Voreqe Bainimarama joined twenty-eight other heads of government to attend the “Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation” in Beijing in May. After meetings between Bainimarama, President Xi, and Premier Li Keqiang, China and Fiji signed an Economic and Technical Cooperation Agreement and an agreement establishing a China-Fiji Trade and Economic Co-operation Commission. With China now serving as Fiji’s largest donor, Bainimarama also agreed to close Fiji’s trade office in Taiwan.

While Australia currently stands aloof from the BRI, other Asia-Pacific nations, including New Zealand, are actively involved. By year’s end, newly reelected PNG Prime Minister Peter O’Neill had signed a series of infrastructure deals with China under the BRI.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is now investigating how China might finance regional initiatives to meet SDG development targets (UNDP 2017). This initiative comes as Australia, the United States, and other traditional donors are reducing their funding to UN agencies in the Pacific.

Despite the increasing regional engagement, there are still contradictions in Beijing’s rising influence. The widespread celebration of China’s rapid economic growth underplays the internal contradictions of China’s social transformation, which involves rising proletarian expectations and labor unrest; massive environmental and energy problems; and unresolved questions over Tibet, Taiwan, Hong

Kong and Uyghur nationalism. On the 80th anniversary of its publication, it's worth rereading Mao Zedong's classic essay "On Contradiction" as a reminder of the contradictions between classes and peoples in China (Mao 1967 [1937]).

In regional think tanks and conferences, there is extensive debate over whether China's outreach in the Islands is part of a strategic masterplan or the outcome of decisions by state-owned companies and private investors. Strategic analysts are worried that Pacific governments face significant debt burdens from Chinese soft loans and overuse of Chinese labor (Lowy 2018).

In response, China's Ambassador to Australia Cheng Jingye claimed: "China often takes into account the debt-paying ability and solvency of recipient countries, so avoiding creating too high a debt burden to recipient countries. . . . As the largest developing country in the world, China has been—all along—committed to providing all possible assistance to other developing countries within the framework of South-South cooperation. This is a key demonstration of China's role as a responsible major power. In providing foreign aid, the Chinese government always attaches no political strings, and fully respects the wishes and needs of the recipient countries" (Cheng 2018).

Like all donors, however, China does attach political strings, requiring reaffirmation of the One China policy. States like Vanuatu, Papua New Guinea, and (unsuccessfully) Fiji have been encouraged to support China's position in international maritime disputes in the South China

Sea. Beijing also welcomes silence on sensitive topics like Tibet. Pacific aid recipients have been noticeably quiet about Chinese domestic human rights abuses.

For Forum Secretary-General Taylor, it's getting harder to juggle these sensitivities: "We've noticed a real heightened intensity over the last couple of months particularly, wanting our countries to be clear about the One China policy, insisting that missions that are promoting trade in Taiwan be closed. For the Secretariat, we respond to the member states and six of our members recognize Taiwan, so we have to accommodate that" (Maclellan 2017b).

With Taiwan-aligned states like Palau now being wooed by Beijing, Taiwan must work harder to maintain the allegiance of its supporters. In November, incoming Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen visited the Marshall Islands, Solomon Islands, and Tuvalu.

Despite this diplomacy, Taiwanese academic Kwei-Bo Huang has argued that Taiwan's citizens are not supportive of the government's expensive outreach to small Caribbean and Pacific states: "Most believe aid to Pacific nations and Taiwan's allies is a waste. In Taiwan, unfortunately, the South Pacific allies have often been portrayed as 'poor, small, and black' countries coveting Taiwan's money. It is undeniable that part of Taiwan's effort in this region has been focusing on winning official recognition while under pressure from Beijing" (Huang 2017).

With Chinese officials monitoring criticism in the region, Xi Jinping's current crackdown on corruption has extended to the Islands. In an

unprecedented move, Chinese officials chartered a plane to Nadi in August and seventy-seven Chinese citizens living in Fiji were deported back to China, allegedly for involvement in telecom and online fraud. China's official explanation for this unusual extradition was questioned by the Fiji opposition, who raised questions about prostitution by Chinese nationals overstaying in Fiji. China analyst Graeme Smith noted: "One of the great ironies of these show arrests is that the Chinese police were given more power in Fiji than they usually wield in China" (Smith 2017).

During periods of conflict and anti-Chinese rioting a decade ago, China evacuated its citizens from Tonga, Timor-Leste, and Solomon Islands aboard civilian aircraft (Smith 2012). Now defense analysts are concerned about possible future use of military aircraft for regional emergencies (Connolly 2016).

China's diplomatic profile in the region is raising concern in New Delhi as well as Canberra, Wellington, and Tokyo. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Fiji in 2014, and President Pranab Mukherjee visited Papua New Guinea and New Zealand in April 2016 (the visit to Port Moresby was a first for an Indian head of state). Even after these state visits, India-Pacific relations have been slow to take off, despite the creation of the Forum for India-Pacific Islands Cooperation, which held leaders' summits in Suva in 2014 and Jaipur in 2015.

Suva hosted the India-Pacific Islands Sustainable Development Conference in May 2017, welcoming a large delegation led by India's

Minister of State for External Affairs General V K Singh (Singh 2017). At the conference, India provided F\$3.6 million (US\$1.8 million) toward the Bainimarama government's micro and small business grants program, as well as funds for the COP23 Secretariat. The two countries also signed a new defense agreement, with pledges by New Delhi to improve Fiji's small and outdated naval base. In December, the Indian government provided a further F\$1 million (US\$495,000) grant to the Fijian sugar industry to purchase agricultural equipment from India.

At a time of nuclear crisis (discussed later in this review), South Korea is also seeking to expand its modest links to the region. In December, newly elected President Moon Jae-in met with foreign ministers from thirteen Pacific Island countries at his presidential office, during the third South Korea-Pacific Islands Forum foreign ministers' dialogue.

Moon announced that he hoped to participate in the November 2018 Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit to be hosted in Papua New Guinea. The O'Neill government is hoping that APEC will strengthen economic ties between Asia and the Pacific Islands, especially investment in Papua New Guinea. Already, Australia and New Zealand have provided policing and intelligence support to the PNG government as Port Moresby prepares for a major influx of international delegates.

Australia and New Zealand continue to collaborate on counter-terrorism and transnational crime in the region—work that continues despite political tensions between the conservative Coalition in Canberra and the

new Ardern Labour government in Wellington. In one spat, a NZ Labour member of Parliament was falsely accused of instigating a citizenship dispute involving Australian Deputy Prime Minister Barnaby Joyce (a dual ANZ citizen). Foreign Minister Julie Bishop foolishly attacked “treacherous behavior” by NZ Labour, saying she “would find it very hard to build trust with those involved in allegations designed to undermine the Government of Australia” (Belot and Dziedzic 2017).

These spats, however, do not overcome common interests within the Forum. Michael Goldsmith has noted that “the cultural gap between the twin white settler nations and their Pacific counterparts sometimes thrust the former two into an alliance vis-à-vis the rest” (2017, 190).

Security policy remains a central element of Pacific regionalism. Despite storm clouds brewing over self-determination in Bougainville and New Caledonia, it was a relatively stable year in the region.

Indonesian President Joko Widodo visited West Papua in May, the fifth visit he has made in an effort to promote Indonesian development initiatives. This soft diplomacy has not quietened the West Papuan nationalist movement, which responded with protests. During the month of the president’s visit, police arrested nearly two hundred people in Sentani and seventy-seven members of the West Papua National Committee (KNPB) in Merauke.

Representatives of the United Liberation Movement for West Papua (ULMWP) continued to lobby for regional action. Benny Wenda

toured New Zealand in May to meet politicians, officials, and trade unions, while Octo Mote attended the September Forum leaders’ meeting in Apia, after lobbying in Melanesian capitals. Samoan union supporters of the ULMWP rallied opposite the Forum venue.

With action on West Papua within the Forum and the MSG blocked by the larger powers, the “Group of Seven” countries have been taking initiatives in international forums. Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, Nauru, Palau, and the Marshall Islands presented a joint statement on West Papua to the ACP (African, Caribbean, and Pacific Groups of States) Council of Ministers in Brussels in May. Indonesia reacted sharply. In a tone unlikely to win friends, the Indonesian embassy in Port Vila stated: “The overwhelming majority of Pacific countries have no agenda to push for the separation of sovereign territories of Indonesia. Calls to redraw the borders of Indonesia by a few politicians in Vanuatu, Solomon Islands and elsewhere, are simply crazy and irrational talk. These absurdities are talks of desperate and vulnerable political leaders clinging to stay in power” (RNZI 2017b).

Given diverse positions among Forum members, Dame Meg Taylor has proposed a “softly, softly” approach to engagement with Jakarta: “The Forum as a whole is concerned about human rights issues, but wants those conversations with Indonesia to continue, recognizing that you’ve got leadership in Indonesia that is much more open about issues in Papua and West Papua” (MacLellan 2017e). In their communiqué from Apia, Forum



leaders recognized “the constructive engagement by the Forum countries with Indonesia with respect to elections and human rights in West Papua and Papua and to continue a dialogue in an open and constructive manner” (PIFS 2017b).

During the year, there has been some significant progress toward more self-governance and protection of Indigenous rights in Rapa Nui. Chile turned over administration of the Rapa Nui national park to a board elected by Indigenous people. A bill to severely restrict non-Indigenous immigration to the island is under consideration by the Chilean congress. Despite this, genuine political autonomy and the usurpation of land titles by the Chilean state are ongoing problems (Gomez 2010).

After fourteen years and A\$2.8 billion (US\$2.2 billion) cost to Australia, the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) formally ended at the end of June. Over this period, 7,280 Australian Defence Force personnel were deployed to Solomon Islands under Operation Anode, working with His Majesty’s Armed Forces from Tonga and New Zealand and Papua New Guinea defense forces. RAMSI’s Participating Police Force involved officers from every Forum member country.

RAMSI won popular support for the rapid demilitarization of the 1998–2003 political and social crisis and the subsequent destruction of weapons. But later “state-building” and policing operations were more controversial (Fraenkel, Madraiwiwi, and Okole 2014). To evaluate the costs and benefits of RAMSI, citizens of Solomon Islands can access a valuable research

tool about the RAMSI years with the publication of a “Select Bibliography on Solomon Islands, 2003–2017” by longtime historian of Melanesia Clive Moore (Moore 2017).

Despite the end of RAMSI, Australia maintains an ongoing defense relationship with Honiara through its Defence Cooperation Program. A new package of law and justice support will be implemented through the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and the Australian Federal Police.

In turn, Solomon Islands has followed other Pacific countries into UN peacekeeping. Five Royal Solomon Islands Police officers joined the United Nations African Mission in Darfur (UNAMID) for a twelve-month deployment in 2016–2017. As Prime Minister Sogavare noted before the UN General Assembly in September, “This is Solomon Islands’ first humble contribution to the maintenance of world peace” (Sogavare 2017). Alongside Papua New Guinea Defence Force soldiers, police officers from Solomon Islands, Palau, Sāmoa, and Fiji have now served in UNAMID.

Nuclear disarmament surged back on to the regional and international agenda in 2017, as US President Donald Trump and North Korean President Kim Jong-un traded macho barbs over who had the biggest button. Kim threatened missile launches toward US military bases in Guåhan (Guam), while Trump threatened to rain “fire and fury” on the Korean people.

Given that Pacific peoples have suffered from more than 310 nuclear tests—in Marshall Islands, French Polynesia, Kiribati, Australia, and Johnston Atoll—there was widespread anger when Trump tweeted that the



United States “must greatly strengthen and expand its nuclear capability, until such time as the world comes to its senses regarding nukes” (Trump 2016).

The year 2017–2018 is the 60th anniversary of the United Kingdom’s Grapple hydrogen bomb tests, conducted on Malden Island and Christmas (Kiritimati) Island in the British Gilbert and Ellice Islands colony—today part of Kiribati. British authorities continue to resist compensation pleas from nuclear veterans from Britain, Fiji, and New Zealand who face adverse health effects after participating in Operation Grapple (Maclellan 2017c).

Even with the failure of the 2014 RMI disarmament case in the US Federal Court and litigation in the International Court of Justice (ICJ), the cases have had an effect on nuclear policy by the weapons states. After the RMI case against the United Kingdom won support from half the ICJ bench, the British government withdrew from compulsory ICJ jurisdiction on matters relating to nuclear disarmament in February 2017 (UK Government 2017).

In a 1 March speech on the anniversary of the US Bravo hydrogen bomb test, RMI President Hilda Heine called for the United States to take responsibility for health and environmental impacts of past nuclear testing across her country (Maclellan 2017a). The 2017 Forum communiqué required that “the Forum Secretariat coordinate assistance by CROP agencies to the Republic of the Marshall Islands in addressing ongoing impacts of nuclear testing including human rights, environmental contamination and health

impacts,” with a report on actions to be prepared for the 49th Forum in Nauru (PIFS 2017b).

In March and July, more than 120 governments met to negotiate a treaty to ban nuclear weapons under international law. The call for a nuclear ban treaty was based on the recognition that the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapon use is morally unacceptable and that these weapons of mass destruction represent a significant risk to human security.

At the March negotiations, the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) launched a report on the impact of testing in the Pacific (Maclellan 2017d). ICAN also supported Indigenous activists from French Polynesia, Marshall Islands, Fiji, Japan, and Aboriginal Australia to travel to New York to lobby governments. This lobbying led to significant outcomes, with a key section in the treaty obliging parties to assist nuclear survivors and the preamble recognizing “the disproportionate impact of nuclear-weapon activities on indigenous peoples” (UN 2017b). After adoption in a 122–1–1 vote, the treaty was opened for signature on 20 September. Fiji, Kiribati, New Zealand, Palau, Sāmoa, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu were among the fifty states that signed the treaty on the first day. Once fifty nations have ratified or acceded to the new ban treaty, it will enter into force.

Addressing the UN General Assembly, Forum Chair Tuilaepa said: “As a signatory to this historic treaty, we wanted to demonstrate unequivocally our aspiration to have a world without nuclear weapons. The conventional narrative that the possession of

nuclear weapons will act as deterrent to make the world a safer place to live, is not borne out by the current realities—otherwise the developments in the Korean peninsula would not have happened at all” (Tuilaepa 2017b).

Aligned with US extended nuclear deterrence, the Turnbull government opposed, then boycotted, the process, the first time ever that Australia has refused to participate in multilateral disarmament negotiations. On the other hand, Australian activists were the founders of ICAN in April 2007. Their vision of a nuclear-free world was rewarded a decade later when the global citizens’ movement was awarded the 2017 Nobel Peace Prize.

Citizen diplomacy in the Pacific, however, was set back by the tragic deaths of regional champions for disarmament, demilitarization, and the rights of Pacific peoples. In 2017, we lost French activist Bruno Barril-lot, a founder of Moruroa e Tatou in Tahiti; Yankunytjatjara elder Yami Lester, blinded by British nuclear tests on Aboriginal land; Marshall Islands Ambassador Tony de Brum, a prophet on disarmament, climate change, and Micronesian sovereignty; and Tere-sia Teaiwa, scholar, poet, feminist, and mentor to a generation of young women and men. We can but hope to carry on their vision for the region.

NIC MACLELLAN

*Disclosure: The author is a former ICAN board member and author of the ICAN nuclear-testing study “Prohibiting Nuclear Weapons: A Pacific Islands Priority.”*

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