

Geopolitical tensions challenge Pacific regionalism

by Niuone Eliuta

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Ching-te Lai, President of the Republic of China (Taiwan) visits Tuvalu, December 2024

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The Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), a vital platform for regional cooperation, has long been a space where Pacific nations address shared challenges like climate change, economic development and cultural preservation. However, recent actions by China to undermine Taiwan's participation — at previous Forum meetings, including the 2024 meeting in Tonga, and now ahead of the 2025 meeting in Honiara, Solomon Islands — threaten the Forum's integrity and the core values that define Pacific regionalism.

Last year, at the 53rd PIF Leaders Meeting in Nuku'alofa, Tonga, China made a bold move to erase Taiwan's presence. Taiwan has been **a development partner of the PIF** since 1992, contributing millions to support Pacific priorities, not confined to Taiwan's Pacific allies. **China's Special Envoy Qian Bo** demanded the removal of a communique clause reaffirming Taiwan's role, calling it "unacceptable". The clause was unfortunately dropped in the revised communique. This wasn't just a diplomatic flex; it was a calculated step to marginalise Taiwan, reflecting Beijing's "One China" policy.

The 54th PIF meeting is to be hosted from 8 to 12 September 2025 by Solomon Islands, **a former ally of Taiwan that switched to China** in 2019. So, there is a **high probability that China will repeat** this playbook, leveraging economic ties, security pacts and diplomatic pressure to dismantle Taiwan's three-decade role in the Forum, a move that risks fracturing the PIF's unity. Taiwan's allies like **Palau continue to advocate** for Taiwan's full access to the summit this year.

However, the **Solomon Islands' cabinet** still hasn't come up with a decision on Taiwan's participation. This indecision was **criticised by a Member of Parliament Peter Kenilorea Jnr** who stated, "The wisdom of Solomon needs to be summoned now. Otherwise, we run the risk of being the wedge that breaks apart PIF solidarity for an issue that holds no particular national interest for us, or any of the PIF members." The last thing the region wants to see is members' boycotting Honiara.

Tuvalu has done so before in a similar situation when former [Foreign Minister Simon Kofe withdrew](#) from the 2022 UN Ocean Conference after China blocked three of his Taiwanese delegates from attending.

The recent [Beijing Pacific Islands Foreign Ministers Meeting](#) in Xiamen in May 2025 saw the strengthening of efforts to remove Taiwan from the region. They reaffirmed in their [joint statement](#), paragraph 4: “All parties recognize that there is but one China in the world, that Taiwan is an inalienable part of China’s territory ... China firmly opposes ‘Taiwan independence’ in all forms and commits to realizing national reunification, which has gained wide understanding and support at the meeting.”

This is a strong but irrelevant statement as the meeting was only attended by half of the PIF’s island member countries. The PIF is an inter-governmental organisation owned by all its members, yet the same meeting discussed the *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent* without the presence of the full owners of the strategy. The joint statement, paragraph 6, said, “All parties agreed to continue to promote synergy between high-quality Belt and Road cooperation and the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent to make greater contributions to regional prosperity and development.”

Pacific regionalism is not just a framework; it’s a cultural tapestry woven from shared values, with respect standing as a cornerstone. Across the multi-dimensional cultures of the Pacific — from Micronesia to Melanesia and Polynesia — respect underpins relationships, decision-making and cooperation. It’s the glue that holds our region together, enabling small island states to navigate global pressures while amplifying their collective voice. A value left by our ancestors as the backbone of our region; a value that all members of our region speak of — from our elders to our men and women, and down to our children.

In the Reo Maori, respect is translated *whakaute* or *whakamana*, which are deeply rooted and embedded in the concepts of *tikanga* or Maori customary practices. The emphasis is on humility and valuing relationships. These Pacific values are being tested by the current geo-political tension between powers that are not part of the region. But it is not so much China and Taiwan that we must question; the question of regionalism and its values should be directed to us — as keepers of our region and owners of our intergovernmental organisation.

For countries like Tuvalu, Palau and the Marshall Islands, which maintain diplomatic ties with Taiwan, these actions undermine their right to engage freely with allies within a regional body meant to foster inclusivity. Tuvalu’s foreign policy *Te Sikulagi* offers an insight into why this matters. Embedded in [Tuvaluan and Christian values](#), it revolves around two key concepts: *falepili* (neighbourliness and mutual support)

and *kaitasi* (shared responsibility and unity). These principles emphasise respect, community and collaboration — values that Taiwan's contributions as a development partner have honoured since 1992.

China's campaign against Taiwan risks eroding the PIF's very own purpose. If Beijing's aspiration succeeds in Honiara, it could set a precedent for external powers to dictate the Forum's membership and priorities, weakening us as a region. Regionalism thrives when all voices (big and small) are heard, not when one nation imposes its will. The PIF is not a zero-sum game. Tuvalu, Palau and the Marshall Islands don't object to China's dialogue partner status, so why should other members oppose Taiwan's development partner role?

The stakes extend beyond Taiwan and China. These geo-political tensions could divert meeting time and attention away from the real challenges and issues in our region. Our leaders need to maximise the opportunities afforded by such platforms, not referee disputes between these two countries.

China and its Pacific allies must recognise Pacific regionalism for what it is: a values-driven partnership, not a geostrategic chessboard. Acknowledging Taiwan as a development partner doesn't threaten Beijing's interests — it strengthens the Forum's ability to deliver for its people. Taiwan and its Pacific allies coexist with China in the PIF without issue, expecting only the same respect in return.

If China embraces this approach, the Honiara meeting could be a success, uniting rather than dividing the region.

The Pacific way is one of dialogue, not domination. As the meeting is just weeks away, our leaders have a choice: respect the values that define this region, or risk unravelling the very fabric of Pacific regionalism.

For the sake of our shared future, let's hope they choose wisely.

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