

Pacific Islands Forum meeting: some highlights and reflections

by Tess Newton Cain

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Leaders at the 52nd PIF meeting in Cook Islands

Photo Credit: [Pat Conroy MP/Facebook](#)

It was a busy week in Rarotonga, from 6 to 10 November, as the 52nd **Pacific Islands Forum** (PIF) Leaders Meeting rolled into town. Although a few of the **key leaders were absent**, most notably from Melanesia, there was still plenty of action leaving us with much to reflect on.

Hosting the PIF Leaders Meeting gives the country an opportunity to make it their own to some extent. In Cook Islands, there were some excellent displays of culture through song, dance, decoration and food. In addition, there was a very public, almost blatant demonstration of that country's (or rather its government's) enthusiasm for deep seabed mining as a form of economic diversification and to contribute to the energy transition. Each of the leaders was **presented with** a carved model of a *vaka* (canoe) containing a polymetallic nodule.

At least one of the leaders declined to take his home. President Surangel Whipps Jr of Palau and Ralph Regenvanu of Vanuatu both **reiterated their countries' objections** to the exploitation of the seabed at a screening of the documentary film *Deep Rising* on the margins of the leaders meeting.

The issue of deep seabed mining and the variety of views within the regional leadership was obviously a significant topic of conversation at the leaders retreat. This is reflected in **the communiqué**. Even though it appears in the "other matters" section of the document, the fact that the leaders have requested a *talanoa* (conversation) on the topic during 2024 is indicative of its significance.

Given the very rocky road of the last few years, there is ongoing interest in how united and stable the regional grouping is. The issue of the appointment of the Forum secretary-general continues to be a source of tension and we saw that flare again at this year's meeting. The sub-meeting of Micronesian states **confirmed Baron Waqa** (former President of Nauru) as their choice to succeed Henry Puna, despite lingering concerns about his suitability. Then, at the leaders' plenary session, the Samoan delegation requested a late addition to the agenda for the retreat to discuss the appointment of the secretary-general. This **prompted a**

walkout by President David Adeang of Nauru and his delegation.

Despite some shuttle diplomacy, Adeang was not to be swayed and did not attend the leaders retreat on Aitutaki. He and the delegation, including Baron Waqa, left on a private jet early on the Thursday morning. Prime Minister Mark Brown of Cook Islands, and the Forum Chair, described Adeang's departure as "unexpected" but did not seem unduly perturbed by the disruption.

Despite the wrangling, Waqa was confirmed as the next secretary-general. One thing is certain: the Forum cannot go through this amount of angst every time a new secretary-general is to be appointed, so there is a serious need to work on this process between now and when the time comes to choose the next one.

A noticeable aspect of this meeting was the return of the Forum dialogue partners to the fray. Last year they were asked to stay away from the meeting in Fiji, allowing leaders to focus on the "inner circle" at the first in-person meeting since COVID-19. This year they were welcomed back. However, it was clear from the outset that Cook Islands as chair and the Forum more broadly had refreshed expectations of these relationships. With 21 dialogue partners already, plus eight whose applications are still pending, this is cat-herding on a significant scale.

At the first of the high-level thematic dialogues on Friday, the delegation from Saudi Arabia was the first to speak. Their Minister for Tourism, Ahmed Al Khateeb, made it clear he was not there to play. He announced a pledge of US\$50 million to the Pacific Resilience Facility (PRF), which represents 10% of the initial capitalisation. The PRF has been in the works for several years and was endorsed by leaders at this meeting. Al Khateeb also expressed his country's hope that Pacific nations would support the Saudi bid to host Expo 2030. Meanwhile Samsung's chairman Lee Jae-yong spent the week working the room to drum up support for South Korea's bid to host the same.

In a press conference later that day, Mark Brown said that this announcement from Saudi Arabia set the tone for what he hoped to see from dialogue partners, particularly in relation to support for the PRF. However, the European Union delegation was quite clear this was not where they were going, noting that they were focused on aligning their support with the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent. It remains to be seen whether established and aspiring partners will respond to the call from the Pacific to support the PRF.

The last time the Forum met in Rarotonga was 2012, and it was then that the Pacific Leaders Gender Equality Declaration was adopted. This year, back in Cook Islands, we saw the endorsement of the Revitalised Pacific Leaders Gender Equality

Declaration. Among the leaders present at the 52nd Pacific Islands Forum, Fiam? Naomi Mata'afa was the only woman, so this revitalised declaration and the work it will underpin has a lot to achieve.

*This is a blog in an ongoing series of **Pacific Island Forum Leaders' Meeting analysis** by Tess Newton Cain.*

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