

Pacific states are setting the terms of diplomatic engagement

by Henrietta McNeill-Stowers and Maualaivao Maima Koro

11 September 2024



Students from Bareaumai Primary School on the Republic of Kiribati visited the Royal Australian Air Force KA350 King Air at Bonriki International Airport during Operation SOLANIA – ISLAND CHIEF 23-3.

Photo Credit: CPL Melina Young/ADF

During Kiribati's recent election campaign, a letter was sent by the Kiribati Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Immigration to foreign diplomatic missions, **stating that** "due to ongoing national elections, no visits will be permitted ... until the end of December". This means no visits from the peripatetic community of statecraft practitioners: politicians, diplomats, police and defence officials, advisors, development specialists ... the list goes on.

Kiribati has charted its own course: shifting diplomatic relations from Taiwan to China in 2019 (resulting in **a Chinese police presence** in Kiribati); temporarily leaving the Pacific Islands Forum in 2021 as a way of demanding attention for Micronesian issues; and, more recently, challenging **diplomatic visas** for Australians. These moves have made Kiribati a "**strategically important**" hotbed of geopolitical interest, and have made the "diplomatic pause" **a talking point**. The recent election campaign focused on **domestic economic issues**, although this has not deterred foreign diplomats and politicians from wanting to visit and meet with the new government and maintain their influence. Indeed, part of travel ban was ostensibly to prevent "**chequebook diplomacy**" and potential foreign interference.

While Kiribati's announcement left officials scrambling, this is not the first time a Pacific state has asked for an international visit pause to consider their own priorities. On one level, it is a sign of a mature democracy.

Samoa has had three annual "no missions" periods for several years. Diplomats and advisors are requested to avoid travelling to the country between December and January (Christmas shutdowns and cyclone season), April and May (budgetary planning), and August and October (cyclone season preparation). Pausing international engagement allows countries to really reflect on their own priorities, processes, and decisions. In the case of Samoa, the government is defining its **own**

terms of engagement, ensuring its priorities come first.

On another level, Samoa and Kiribati's requests are symptomatic of a saturation of absorptive capacity. Even outside of election periods, official visits are resource-intensive for the host nation, diverting officials and politicians from their day-to-day roles, which might for example include visiting the 20 inhabited outer islands of Kiribati, which rightly demand priority attention. Partner states with larger bureaucratic resources often overlook the demands that visits by foreign delegations place on host governments. This includes organising welcome ceremonies and cultural performances, providing hospitality, hosting meetings, and answering (many) questions. Many public service agencies in Pacific island states, including law enforcement agencies, are small and under-resourced.

In the case of Kiribati, the National Economic and Planning Office usually only has two or three staff, and yet they are responsible for coordinating and meeting the bureaucratic reporting requirements of all of Kiribati's internationally-funded development projects — large and small. Many government ministries are headed and staffed by practitioners juggling multiple roles within the organisation. When they are pulled into meetings with foreign diplomats and advisors, they are often being taken away from essential duties such as seeing patients or handling on-the-ground policing tasks. COVID-19 demonstrated that without partner “noise” Pacific states could actually get on with what they needed to do, in ways that were more sensitive to their local environment. This makes the argument for international visit pauses a strong one.

Partners could coordinate better to ensure that they are meeting the needs of Pacific states and avoid duplication. Documents like the [2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent](#), [National Development Plans](#) and [National Security Strategies](#) should be the first ports of call for partners. While gap analyses and speaking with stakeholders are important, they do not need to be conducted by every partner individually — they could be shared among partners or done collaboratively. We have both arrived at Pacific airports to undertake training needs analyses, only to find that counterparts from other partner states are departing on our incoming plane after completing their own assessments. Better communication and the sharing of outcome documents could prevent such duplication, saving both time and carbon emissions.

The Partners in the Blue Pacific initiative, although established ostensibly to coordinate activities between partners, appears more like a [list of announceables](#) rather than a genuine effort to deconflict and share information for the benefit of Pacific states.

Visits have **only multiplied** with geopolitical competition in the region, including the Chinese Foreign Minister's **tour of the region** in 2022 in pursuit of a (failed) regional security pact. Additional commitments have also been made by leaders of traditional partners. Australia's "Pacific Step-Up" **achieved its promise** of creating diplomatic missions in every Pacific Islands Forum state. However, the High Commissioner to Kiribati appointed in April 2023 has been **unable to travel** as her diplomatic visa paperwork was delayed. Following the New Zealand election, Foreign Minister Winston Peters **made the promise** to visit every Forum member state in 2024 — but will not be able to achieve this due to Kiribati's request.

These setbacks should not leave partners panicking though. The race to be the first to visit, call, or conduct **an overseas mission** can often be counterproductive and disruptive. While Kiribati "**feels sorry**" for the pause, "for us it makes more sense to do it".

Pacific countries through their post-colonial development experiences are finding their own democratic solutions to meet their aspirations. Rather than panic, development partners should instead embrace and celebrate the "**mutual emergence**" of Pacific countries. **Pausing** is a necessary Pacific value, after all, and Pacific countries were never given the space to define their own democracies.

Diplomatic influence is best gained through **trust and listening**. Kiribati is asking for breathing space, and the best way to respect its government's wishes is to give them space for their own conversations. Breathing into their ears will not help gain trust, it will only detract from the real work that needs to be done locally. One way to really assist is to deal with the issue of absorptive capacity.

Author/s:

Henrietta McNeill-Stowers

Henrietta McNeill-Stowers is a research fellow (Pacific security, geopolitics, regionalism) with the Department of Pacific Affairs at the Australian National University.

Maulaivao Maima Koro

Maima Koro is the Pacific Research Fellow and academic co-lead of the Regional Perspectives research collaboration, between the University of Adelaide and Pacific partners.

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