

# Sea of Western flags in Oceania?

by Greg Fry and Terence Wesley-Smith

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US Secretary of State Blinken hosting the Partners in the Blue Pacific ministerial meeting in September 2022

*Photo Credit: Ron Przysucha/U.S. Department of State/Flickr*

In his recently published article “[Sea of many flags](#)”, the Head of the ANU National Security College Rory Medcalf makes the case for why Pacific Island states should regard the deep regional involvement of a Western coalition of powers, “quietly” led by Australia, as an effective and attractive “Pacific way to dilute China’s influence”.

Although presented as a new proposal, the increased regional engagement of this Western coalition is already well advanced, in the form of proposed new military bases and joint-use facilities, new security treaties, increased aid programs, new embassies, as well as a new regional institution, [Partners in the Blue Pacific](#) (PBP). Medcalf’s main task is not to persuade Canberra of the merits of this approach, but rather to demonstrate to a sceptical Pacific audience that this Western coalition’s Indo-Pacific strategy is compatible with the Blue Pacific strategy of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF).

Medcalf argues that an Indo-Pacific strategy of containing China supports the broad concept of human security embraced by Pacific Island leaders in their 2018 [Boe Declaration](#), which includes the key demand for climate change action. He also argues that the strategy would support the Blue Pacific emphasis on Pacific Island sovereignty by countering Chinese attempts to dominate the region. Thus he moves beyond the [argument \(made for example by Sandra Tarte\)](#) that there are some meeting points between these two world views and posits their complete compatibility. His purpose is to counter the position of Pacific insiders, like [former Secretary-General of PIF Dame Meg Taylor](#), and Professor [Tarcisius Kabutaulaka](#), [who argue](#) that these security narratives are antithetical.

Medcalf proposes a model of security governance dominated by a Western coalition of interests operating through institutions like the [Quad](#), [AUKUS](#) and PBP, where Pacific Islander influence is marginal or non-existent. Australia is seen as the “hub”

for Western alliance management of the Pacific, acting as a “guide and informal coordinator”, ensuring that investments are organised efficiently and “in line with what Pacific communities want”. PBP aid projects would be deployed in support of the objectives outlined in the Boe Declaration as well as PIF’s [2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent](#).

The problem here is that, at best, this security model operates on behalf of Pacific interests, but not under the control of Pacific governments or regional institutions created for that purpose.

The argument for compatibility between the Indo-Pacific and Blue Pacific strategies does not consider key aspects of the Pacific vision for the future, such as urgent climate action, where there are clear discrepancies especially regarding limiting emissions. Asking Island leaders to curtail China’s regional role requires them to compromise their long-standing foreign policy ethos of “friends to all and enemies to none”. Nor is it clear that Medcalf’s approach would support Island sovereignty, when the major threats seem to come from Western actors, including increased military activity in Micronesia, the [undermining of regional institutions](#) by external initiatives such as PBP, continuing colonial rule in French Polynesia and New Caledonia, and ongoing American control (and deepening militarisation) of Guam.

Australian military [plans to allow US stationing and storage of nuclear weapons in north Australia](#) appear to violate the terms of the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty, and Japan’s proposal to release into the ocean nuclear waste from the Fukushima power plant meltdown is causing considerable consternation in the region. Medcalf’s argument that adoption of the Indo-Pacific mental map could bring together Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean islands to discuss common challenges misses the 30-year history of such collaboration within the Alliance of Small Island States.

Another problem with this analysis is its frankly unhelpful characterisation of China’s Pacific engagement. According to Medcalf, China “has a rightful place in the Pacific, just not a right to dominate”. However, he provides no evidence that China does in fact seek regional hegemony, and cites no examples where its behaviour in the Pacific Islands might be regarded as “bullying” or “coercive”. The ten island countries that recognise Beijing have signed up to participate in the much-maligned Belt and Road Initiative without any apparent coercion.

Nor does Medcalf provide Pacific examples of the debt-for-equity argument often levelled at China’s lending practices in the Global South. When Tonga had difficulty servicing Chinese loans, [Beijing agreed to extend their terms](#). Even the claim that China seeks to establish a military base in the region, a central plank in Western

narratives, remains unsubstantiated. Recent [studies by the RAND Corporation](#) (funded by the US military) provide some useful perspective by ranking Fiji and Papua New Guinea of “medium desirability” but “low feasibility” for Chinese military initiatives. Other Pacific locations, including Solomon Islands and Kiribati, are not seen as feasible.

To describe Beijing’s engagement as “neo-colonial” is to invite comparisons with the activities of the Western coalition, key members of which retain actual colonies in the region. Nor is Australia in a strong position to accuse others of manipulative behaviour. For example, Canberra’s efforts to protect its coal industry by working to [weaken PIF statements about climate change mitigation](#) are well documented, date back to the beginning of the COP negotiations, and continue today.

Ultimately Medcalf’s central argument falls because it does not consider the issue of self-determination which is at the heart of the Blue Pacific strategy. Although Medcalf calls for “a premium on self-awareness, inclusion, and genuine diplomacy”, his proposal effectively devalues Pacific agency and marginalises Pacific decision makers.

“Sea of many flags” claims to promote strategic equilibrium in the Pacific, yet it really aims to create the conditions for continuing Western hegemony. It claims to counter geopolitical competition and militarisation while shoring up and expanding Western military domination. It claims to act in the interests of Pacific peoples, yet seems designed to moderate opposition to recent anti-China initiatives established under the auspices of the Indo-Pacific strategy and without meaningful consultation. By allowing some role for China, albeit a limited one, Medcalf is advocating a softer form of strategic denial than that imposed by Western powers during the Cold War. But his warnings to island states about the dangers of economic engagement with Beijing seem hollow indeed, given Australia’s massive trade dependence on China.

In advocating “a Pacific kind of leadership”, the author (perhaps inadvertently) evokes the principles guiding Pacific leaders in the early days of independence. But it is worth remembering that the essence of the Pacific Way advanced by Ratu Mara and others was Pacific control and regional self-determination. In contrast, what Rory Medcalf is advocating would subsume all of this under the control of the Western alliance, led quietly (or not so quietly) by Australia.

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