

The Pacific crossroads: Gaza vs the crisis at our door

by Ro Naulu Mataitini

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Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese in Nadi, Fiji, June 2025

Photo Credit: [LinkedIn/Prime Minister and Cabinet](#)

An invitation from a distant warzone landed in Suva earlier this month. The United States, with Israel's endorsement, has asked Fiji to send troops to join a proposed **International Stabilization Force** in Gaza. For a nation proud of its United Nations peacekeeping legacy, this whispers of global recognition. Yet, it is a dangerous siren's call, urging Fiji toward a perilous mission that risks betraying a far more urgent duty at home. This force would swap impartial peacekeeping for coercive enforcement, serving great-power ambition over principle.

Simultaneously, Australia faces its own costly summons, involving a bill of up to US\$1 billion, to take up a permanent seat on a controversial "**Board of Peace**" overseeing Gaza. With no Palestinian voice and critics decrying it as a "transactional colonial solution", this board aims not for peace but to sideline the UN, cementing a donor-driven world order. For the Pasifika, these parallel invitations present a defining choice: expend finite resources on a flawed project thousands of miles away, or assert true regional independence by confronting the clear and present danger eroding our own communities — the transnational crime and drug epidemic.

The Gaza plan is architecturally unsound. The force Fiji is asked to join is not a traditional UN mission deployed with consent; it is a peace enforcement body expected to demilitarise a shattered, hostile territory — a task requiring overwhelming force and unambiguous political will, neither of which is guaranteed.

The Board of Peace itself is designed for dysfunction, acting as a parallel structure to the UN Security Council where influence is bought, not earned. For Australia, the billion-dollar question is stark: is this investment in distant geopolitical theatre wiser than addressing the existential crisis in its primary sphere of influence?

This moment mirrors a recent lesson from Europe. When President Trump targeted Greenland, European nations stood collectively on the principle of territorial integrity, forcing a retreat. Their unity demonstrated that defending sovereignty collectively is the only way smaller states are protected from the predations of larger ones. For the Pasifika, the lesson is clear: our security lies in collective regional resolve, not in subsidising external power plays that undermine the very multilateral rules that protect us.

This dynamic exposes the core hypocrisy of the new transactional order. It invites regions like ours to help manage conflicts born of imperial histories and great-power rivalries, while the same powers show a willingness to disregard the sovereignty of smaller states when it suits their strategic whims. The Greenland episode is not an isolated fantasy; it is a blueprint. If economic coercion can be levelled against a NATO ally for territory, what guarantees exist for nations in the Pasifika, whose strategic waterways and exclusive economic zones are equally coveted? The Board of Peace model enshrines this very coercion, asking nations to pay for a voice in a system that inherently devalues the sovereign equality that the UN Charter promises.

While Gaza beckons with false prestige, a real war is destroying our social fabric. Fiji's [National Security Strategy](#) identifies the methamphetamine epidemic as a top-tier threat (p.19). Record drug busts reveal not success, but the staggering scale of invasion. This crisis fuels violence, [overwhelms health systems](#), corrupts leaders and drains state resources.

To even contemplate diverting military and political focus to Gaza is to declare this domestic war secondary. It begs a foundational question: what is the ultimate purpose of sovereignty if not to deliver safety and security to one's own people first? This is the primary duty of any state. When institutions are eroded by cartels while security forces look abroad, that duty is failed.

This crisis is the true test of our regional architecture. The traffickers' networks are transnational, exploiting fragmented governance and weak maritime surveillance. Their success is a direct result of our collective vulnerability. To confront them requires a consolidation of sovereignty, not its diversion. Every police officer, intelligence analyst and naval patrol boat committed to a quagmire overseas is a resource stripped from guarding our own shores. The political capital spent navigating the diplomatic minefield of Gaza is capital not spent rallying the Pacific Islands Forum to adopt a wartime footing against a clear, shared enemy. We cannot allow the spectre of one crisis to blind us to the substance of another.

The strategic response lies not in the Middle East, but in our own waters. Australia

must make up its mind. That US\$1 billion — a sum that could transform regional security — could and should be the cornerstone of a bold, coordinated campaign against the drug crisis, championed through the Pacific Islands Forum.

I am not arguing for a return to failed, militarised prohibition. I propose a holistic, regional compact built on:

- Integrated policing: A permanent regional Task Force with real-time intelligence fusion to disrupt trafficking syndicates and their finances.
- Community resilience: Co-designed programs creating economic alternatives for youth and supporting rehabilitation to erode the cartels' demand.
- Institutional integrity: Major initiatives to shield judiciaries and border services from corruption, ensuring the rule of law is an asset.

In a world of transactional great-power politics, Australia must consciously encircle the Pasifika. This means investing politically and financially in the PIF, respecting its priorities and heeding its calls. Addressing this crisis would be an act of enlightened self-preservation for Australia, and a lifeline for the region. The model exists in our history: the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands, known as RAMSI, succeeded because it blended Australian resources with Pasifika personnel and local knowledge. We must summon that spirit again for a more complex fight.

The invitations to Gaza are a test of strategic identity. For Fiji, it is a test of resisting the seductive glare of distant drama for the sober duty of safeguarding the homeland. For Australia, it is a choice: to fund a board that undermines global order or to invest in a sovereign regional compact against a shared existential threat.

True leadership is demonstrated not by saying a reflexive “yes” to powerful patrons, but by having the wisdom to say “no” when their wishes conflict with fundamental principles of multilateralism and life-and-death needs at home. Europe showed that collective defence of sovereignty is how smaller states secure their future. For the Pasifika, our path to security and independence does not run through the rubble of Gaza. It runs through the strengthened, cooperative spirit of our own Blue Continent. Choosing this closer, harder path is the mark of a region that truly knows where it belongs. It is the only choice that builds a legacy of genuine security, leaving our children a future defined not by the crises we attended elsewhere, but by the community we fortified here.

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