

What now for the debate on the future of Pacific regional architecture?

By Greg Fry
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Recapturing the Spirit of 1971: Towards a New Regional Political Settlement in the Pacific



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SSGM DISCUSSION PAPER 2015/3

During her visit to Suva in November 2014, Australian foreign minister, Julie Bishop, received a very warm reception to her attempts to achieve a rapprochement in Australia-Fiji relations. By the end of her visit, diplomatic, economic, and defence relations had been fully restored with the newly elected Bainimarama government (Bishop and Kubuabola 2014).

There was, however, one issue that was unresolved: that of Fiji's reported refusal to accept the invitation to resume its membership of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) unless Australia and New Zealand ceased their membership (Pacnews 2014a).

As a way of defusing the impasse on this significant issue, and of garnering support from other Pacific leaders for Australia's continued participation in the PIF, Foreign Minister Bishop proposed that Fiji and Australia jointly host a summit for Pacific leaders to discuss whether and how the regional architecture should be reconfigured to meet the needs of the Pacific island states in the 21st century (Callick 2014). Her Fijian host, Prime Minister Bainimarama, accepted her proposal, and the meeting is now set for early 2015 in Sydney.

The Sydney Conference: What is at Stake?

For Canberra, Fiji's dramatic demand creates an issue of the highest priority. Australia sees the PIF as the main vehicle for regional management; it sees its own membership of the PIF as crucial to that management. As Foreign Minister Bishop warned in a press conference in Suva in November, she was 'not going to take that [Australia and New Zealand exclusion from the PIF] lying down' (Pacnews 2014b).

However, Canberra also sees Fiji as the hub of the Pacific islands region and regards as crucial Fiji's return to full membership in the PIF rather than remaining outside the PIF tent fostering an alternative regional institutional architecture. There is, then, a lot at stake strategically for Canberra in Fiji's challenge on the question of regional governance.

There is no obvious solution that could satisfy both these strategic objectives. If Australia's bid to win support for continued participation in the PIF for Australia and New Zealand succeeds, Australia risks Fiji following through on its threat not to resume its membership of the PIF.

For the Pacific island states, there are also crucial strategic stakes in the outcome of these discussions. The configuration of the regional architecture is not just about economics and efficiency; it is about regional governance — about who controls the regional agenda and how crucial issues such as Pacific positions on carbon emissions targets are to be handled and represented. While it is not likely that there will be significant support among the island states for the exclusion of Australia and New Zealand from the PIF — indeed, Prime Minister O'Neill has already made clear that Papua New Guinea would not support such a stance (ABC News 2014) — there is a longstanding and widely felt concern among Pacific leaders about the need to gain more Pacific control on issues of strategic concern.

The dialogue leading up to, and during, the Sydney conference is therefore one about the fundamentals of how the region is governed. It is about reaching a regional political settlement between Australia-New

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The cancellation of the planned Sydney summit of Pacific leaders should not be taken as signaling the end of the debate about the future of Pacific regional architecture. Although there have been a number of [reviews](#) of the structure and functions of Pacific regional institutions, there is still a need for a debate about the overall governance and configuration of future regional architecture in the light of Fiji's recent return to democracy in September 2014 and its [refusal](#) to resume its membership of the Pacific Islands Forum unless it undergoes radical reforms.

Dame Meg Taylor, the dynamic new Secretary-General of the Pacific Islands Forum, has recognised this need. She has been [reported on Radio New Zealand International](#) as saying

that ‘a discussion on regional architecture at this time, is I think, important. To ignore it is just to put a lid on sentiments that have been expressed and I think it is important to have a rigorous discussion around this’. She went on to say that:

They have to get in a room. They have to discuss this. They have to consider before they come into the room all the consequences of all the different scenarios of what could happen. I would like to see Fiji be back as a very active member of the PIF because it is a very valuable member of the Pacific region.

What are the scenarios currently on the ‘table’? The first is the Fiji Government proposal that the Pacific Islands Forum become an all-island Forum run by Pacific islanders, for Pacific islanders. As [explained](#) by Prime Minister Bainimarama, ‘we are not interested in going back until it [the PIF] stops being the play thing of the Aussies and Kiwis. When it becomes a genuine expression of the will of the Pacific Islanders themselves, then we will go back, then we will think about re-joining the Forum’. This model draws on the example of regional organisations of developing countries elsewhere in the world – ASEAN, CARICOM, African Union, etc. In such a scenario, Australia and New Zealand would become special dialogue partners in an inner circle of Forum partnerships with donor countries.

Underpinning this model is the idea that the Pacific island states need to control their own diplomatic agenda without the distortion provided by the very different agendas of their large, developed neighbours; and that to deal effectively on key global agendas such as climate change it is a strategic necessity that the region organise as an association of small developing island states so that they can be accepted in global southern coalitions such as AOSIS, and G77 and China. Leveraging Pacific positions through such coalitions, it is argued, is crucial for small island states in contemporary global diplomacy. The strategic case for exclusion has been most persuasively argued by Ambassador [Kaliopate Tavola](#) and by [Derek Brien](#) of the Pacific Institute of Public Policy. Foreign Minister Bishop has [indicated](#) that Australia would not take the adoption of such a model ‘lying down’. It has also been rejected explicitly by Papua New Guinea’s Prime Minister, [Peter O’Neill](#), and Palau’s President, [Tommy Remengesau](#). There has as yet been no explicit support for the exclusion proposal by any Pacific island leader.

A [second scenario](#), proposed by the Fiji Government as an alternative if the first scenario is not agreed to, is one in which all Pacific development partners – Japan, China, Korea, USA, etc – are invited to become full members of the Pacific Islands Forum sitting alongside the Pacific island states as equal members. Given the Fiji Government’s strong stance on achieving an independent Pacific voice in regional diplomacy this has the ring of a rhetorical

point rather than a serious alternative. It is surely a debating point, meant to emphasise the inappropriateness of Australia and New Zealand sitting in the Islands Forum as equal members in a southern organisation when they are in fact development partners rather than developing island state recipients. This proposal clearly goes against the principle of regional self-determination that Fiji has enunciated and acted upon elsewhere. It would in any case be a non-starter politically for all other Pacific island states, and for Australia and New Zealand, which would not welcome the membership of any other metropolitan powers.

A third scenario is that of doing nothing and maintaining the status quo. This will be the default outcome if no debate takes place. Under this scenario, Fiji will not resume its membership of the PIF; and it will continue to promote the Pacific Islands Development Forum (PIDF), Pacific Small Developing Island States grouping (PSIDS), and the Melanesia Spearhead Group (MSG), as an alternate and competing regional system financially supported by Russia, China, UAE, Indonesia and others. Furthermore, if there is no debate about how the Pacific Islands Forum system might work with other parts of this alternate diplomatic system - a system which has gained considerable support from Pacific Island countries - then we would see the entrenchment of two competing Pacific regional systems with overlapping membership. This would hamper Pacific unity on important issues and spread scarce human and financial resources thinly and inefficiently.

A fourth scenario follows from the more conciliatory language in recent pronouncements by the Fiji and Australian foreign ministers. The Fiji foreign minister, Inoke Kubuabola, has [denied](#) that Fiji's position was one of being 'bent on the eviction of Australia and New Zealand from the Pacific Islands Forum'. Rather he is reported as saying that 'regional governance of the Pacific Islands is primarily the responsibility of the island nations themselves' and it is therefore 'logical that metropolitan developed countries like Australia and New Zealand take a step back'. Foreign Minister Bishop provided an equally important basis for dialogue on a compromise scenario in her comments on the proposed regional summit during her visit to Papua New Guinea in December 2014. She [said](#) 'it was time for Pacific leaders to chart their own course ... adding that a Sydney summit early next year could set the regional architecture in place for that to happen.'

There are a number of reform strategies that could be discussed under the broad umbrella of this fourth scenario which ensure Australia and New Zealand 'step back' and the Pacific island states have a greater control over 'charting their own course'. I canvass some of them in my recent SSGM Discussion Paper '[Recapturing the Spirit of 1971](#)'. They include: embracing, rather than competing with, the new Pacific island-controlled diplomatic system which has emerged outside the PIF network in the past five years to meet strategic needs in

global and regional diplomacy; the re-introduction of the island caucus system within the PIF; and changing the financial arrangements of the PIF to allow for more Pacific island ownership (Australia and New Zealand currently provide about 95 per cent of the combined core and regular budget).

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About the author/s

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