

# Cooperation & diplomacy in Oceania: Transformations to the regional system and increased global presence

Oliver Hasenkamp<sup>1</sup>

German Pacific Network, Hauptstraße 2, 91564 Neuendettelsau, Germany<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** Oceania's political institutions as well as the Pacific Island Countries international activities are changing. Especially Fiji's suspension from the Pacific Islands Forum created impediments towards greater regional cooperation within this most eminent regional organization, while sub-regionalism and alternative ways of collaboration were strengthened. At the same time Oceania is receiving renewed global attention. The Pacific Island Countries become increasingly active and visible in international diplomacy. Headed by Fiji they challenge traditional alliances and perceptions and start to take greater responsibility in international organizations such as the United Nations.

**Keywords:** United Nations, Pacific Islands Forum, Pacific Island Countries, Institutional Change, Sub-regionalism, Melanesian Spearhead Group, G77, International Diplomacy

[Submitted as Scientific Paper: 15 April 2014, Acceptance of the revised manuscript: 02 June 2014]

One can argue that Oceania is currently one of the politically most dynamic regions in the world. This is not because of radical changes in the domestic politics of Pacific Islands Countries (PICs), but because of fundamentally altering patterns of cooperation, institutional activities and diplomacy by the PICs. On the regional level, there have been some extensive reforms to the structure and culture of regional collaboration in recent years. As a result of several regional events and of the dissatisfaction with the institutional reforms for some years now a lingering reversal of the regional acceptance of the main constructors of these reforms, namely Australia and New Zealand, can be observed. Furthermore, there are indications of sub-regional fragmentation and a challenging of the most eminent regional decision-making body in Oceania, the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF). At the same time, Pacific activity in international diplomacy has reached a level that was unknown to the region before and poses new opportunities, but also challenges for the region. Many of these transformations have been pushed by Fiji, which is not only a regional leader, but also strongly intertwined with the recent regional dynamics. Its suspension from the PIF and boost in global activities has greatly affected the regional institutional dynamics as well as the patterns of Pacific activity in international organizations like the United Nations (UN), which will be discussed in this article.

Figure 1: United Nations Secretary General during his visit to Kiribati in 2011



Source: UN Photo/Eskinder Debebe, 2011.

## Changing regional patterns

Looking back in history, the most important transformation to the system of regional cooperation in the Pacific was the establishment of the South Pacific Forum (SPF), which was founded in 1971 and renamed the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) in 2000. Its creation was an expression of the recently acquired political sovereignty of some PICs. It was also an act of protest against the South Pacific Commission (SPC), which was already founded in 1947 by the former colonial powers. The SPC was accused of being a colonial construct that denied the newly independent countries of Oceania the right to talk about political issues such as French nuclear testing in the Pacific region (Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2004; Nemia, 1986). Consequently, the PIF can be considered as an integral symbol of the region's political independence. Today, more than 40 years after its establishment, the Forum has changed significantly. Not only has its membership increased, but also its structure, decision-making processes and basic norms were subject to many changes. Originally, decision-making in the Forum was based on the so-called Pacific Way, whose characteristics have been specified as consensus, solidarity, Pacific brotherhood, the rejection of colonialism and the upholding of traditional Pacific customs (Crocombe, 1976). Michael Haas called the Pacific Way a "*norm of diplomacy*" that is based on unity, a sense of cultural affinity, equal treatment and informal incrementalism (Haas, 1989). As a result of some of these principles, many critics regarded the PIF, as Eric Shibuya writes, "*as an example of unrealized potential, of an organization of endless (and useless) discussion, where talk has replaced action as the measure of effectiveness*" (Shibuya, 2004).

There have been structural reforms in the last decade that considerably altered the informal character of the PIF and strengthened its secretariat (Blatt, 2011). The organization shifted from reaching harmony "*by avoiding [to talk about] contentious issues within countries*" (Crocombe, 2008) towards a more proactive approach and an agenda dominated by security policy issues. It can be argued that the reforms initially empowered the PIF and especially positively influenced the international activities of the secretariat as well as the organization's global visi-

bility. Not only did UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon participate in the 40th anniversary meeting of the PIF in Auckland in 2011, but the annual high-level Forum summits and the so-called Post-Forum Dialogues in the last years were also attended by high-ranking officials from extra-regional states, including e.g. US Secretaries of State Hillary Clinton and John Kerry as well as the President of the European Commission, José Manuel Barroso. The attractiveness of the Forum to foreign actors is increased by the fact that it is easier and far more cost-effective to approach the entire region via the PIF than to engage in many different bilateral relations with its members.

Despite the emphasis that is put on the PIF by external actors, it seems that this is not always matched in the Pacific itself. There is disappointment with some of the Forum's decisions within some islands governments. Furthermore, PICs' leaders are particularly displeased with Australia's and New Zealand's stance within the organization, especially in regard to their reluctance towards stronger actions against climate change (Barnett/Campbell, 2010) and their position in free trade negotiations (Jayaraman, 2013). However, one important reason for the disappointment also lies in the fact that the above-mentioned reforms not only strengthened the institutional capacities of the PIF, but also subverted some of the organization's fundamentals of the Pacific Way. There was an erosion of the principles of consensus-based decision-making and non-interference into internal affairs of PIF members. In 2005 the Asian Development Bank (ADB) still reported that the low cost of regionalism was one of the major reasons for the PIF's success since the Forum did not limit the sovereignty of its members or put sanctions in place for countries not following mutual decisions (Asian Development Bank, 2005). Especially the so-called Biketawa Declaration contested the low cost of regionalism and marked a departure from the general reluctance to intervene in domestic affairs of member states. The declaration was signed in Kiribati in 2000 and, in the context of ethnic conflicts in Fiji and the Solomon Islands, set out the terms for dealing with regional crises. It was invoked for the first time in 2003, when the Forum authorised the Regional Assistance Mission to the

Solomon Islands (RAMSI) to put an end to interethnic conflict and to secure state institutions. RAMSI fuelled the discussions about the new orientation of the Forum and also about the security policy approach of Australia, which was the major driver of the peacekeeping mission. Still RAMSI also reveals the great interest of Australia to formally legitimize the intervention via the PIF instead of intervening unilaterally and it was a response to a request by the Solomon Islands government (Moore, 2007).

This is a major contrast to the most recent case of application of the Biketawa Declaration, namely Fiji's 2009 suspension from the Forum subsequent to the country's 2006 military coup and its 2009 abrogation of the constitution. This case fundamentally differs from other controversial decisions by the Forum since for the first time action was explicitly taken against the will of one member state – and arguably also against the will of many other Forum members, who did formally not avert the suspension, but never really backed it. Fiji's mere absence as a regional leader and as the host of the PIF's secretariat weakened the institution. High-level representatives of a considerable number of PICs publicly expressed their dissatisfaction with Fiji's suspension, which was most importantly pushed by Australia, New Zealand and Samoa (Hasenkamp, 2011). Many leaders of Forum member countries also frustrated the effective implementation of the suspension by their participation in the so-called *Engaging the Pacific Meetings* that were hosted by Fiji in open rivalry to the PIF summits (Tarte, 2013). Fiji seems to have strategically and somewhat successfully lobbied against the Forum by trying to strengthen existing channels and set up new channels of cooperation outside the PIF, including the sub-regional Melanesian Spearhead Group and the Pacific Islands Development Forum (PIDF). The PIDF was established in 2013 and covers many of the issues that were also discussed at the PIF summits. Its secretariat is located within the Fijian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation and the Prime Minister of Fiji acts as PIDF chair, leaving little doubt about who is the leader of newly established organization (Tarte, 2013; Pacific Islands Development Forum, 2014).



## Sub-regional fragmentation

Particularly in the aftermath of Fiji's suspension from the PIF, and hence from the core of regional cooperation, there was also a revival of sub-regionalism in Oceania that is becoming most obvious in the rise of the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG). Sub-regionalism is no new phenomenon in Oceania. Richard Herr stated already in 1985 that the appeal of sub-regionalism is "[p]erhaps the primary internal impediment to regional action" (Herr 1985: 5). Sub-regionalism becomes an impediment to regionalism when it desires to compete over competencies with regional organizations. This seems to be exactly what the MSG tried to do, when it formalized its structure and took over economic and political responsibilities that are of relevance to the whole region and are already addressed by the PIF (Herr/Bergin, 2011). These developments were pushed by Fiji, which was trying to compensate for the negative effects of its suspension from the PIF with sub-regional and international cooperation and by the dissatisfaction of Fiji's Melanesian neighbours such as Vanuatu or Papua New Guinea with the suspension (Herr/Bergin, 2011; Hasenkamp, 2011).

## Oceania's new prominence in international diplomacy

Regional diplomacy and international diplomacy are by no means separate spheres, but are closely interlinked and influence each other. Therefore, some of the regional dynamics also spill to the international level, where we currently experience gradually increasing activity of the PICs in international organizations such as the United Nations (UN) as well as growing interest of external actors and international institutions towards Oceania. Fiji's Ambassador to the UN, Peter Thompson, said in 2011 that the PICs are now "*wanting to play their full part and assume their rights and responsibilities*" (Radio New Zealand International, 2011). So far the PICs have played, if at all, only a marginal role in the analysis of international affairs. They have been widely ignored and doomed to be of hardly any relevance beyond their role in so-called *aid diplomacy*, more precisely in *selling* their votes in international organizations at the "*sovereignty market*" (Crocombe, 2007). There are in fact many examples for the great depen-

dence of Pacific states on larger actors – for example the Federated States of Micronesia, the Marshall Islands and Palau, who maintain so-called Compacts of Free Association with the United States of America – and for *checkbook diplomacy*, e.g. the prominent example of additional Japanese aid for those states joining the International Whaling Commission and voting in line with Japan (Crocombe, 2008). However, there are several reasons to question whether this very limited perspective on the states of Oceania is fully adequate. Looking more in detail at their activities reveals that the performance of the PICs is far more diverse than a limited view of the PICs as only small, weak and dependent actors that hardly create any influence at all suggests. In contrast, their behaviour is very flexible and largely terminated by the issues concerned. They strategically opt for cooperation with more powerful actors on issues that are of limited relevance to them in order to safeguard financial support, but at the same time they firmly represent their interests and do not obviate confrontation with larger actors, when it comes to their prioritized issues.

The most significant manifestation of the rising prominence and importance of Pacific states in international diplomacy was Fiji's recent chairmanship of the eminent Group of 77 (G77), the most important lobby-group of developing states that consists of 133 nations. The PICs gained more visibility within the UN system also in 2011, when they successfully campaigned within the Asian regional group at the UN to change its name to "Group of Asia and the Pacific Small Island Developing States" in order to accommodate the fact that the PICs constitute over a fifth of the group's membership (Herr/Bergin, 2011). More recently, Kiribati, since its admission to the UN in 1999 the only member of the organization not maintaining an embassy at the UN's headquarters in New York, opened a permanent mission to the UN (Islands Business, 2013). There are also some recent examples for successful lobbying by the PICs, e.g. the re-listing of French Polynesia to the UN's list of non-self-governing territories by a resolution, which was introduced by the PICs and adopted by the UN General Assembly in a meeting boycotted by France in May 2013. So what are the

reasons for the rising institutional interest in the PICs on the one hand and their increased level of activity in international organization on the other hand?

## Reasons for renewed international interest in the Pacific

First, climate change has put the PICs into global media attention and attached some prominence, even though not necessarily influence, to the Pacific. It is obvious that this single most important challenge to the PICs can only be solved at the international level and the PICs have come under pressure to become active on this issue. This is not to say that Oceania suddenly was on the top of the agenda of international organizations or that their interests had a strong representation. However, for the first time the PICs raised their voices, started to closely collaborate with non-governmental organizations, international secretariats and academic institutions and thereby acquired attention and networks that are of relevance beyond climate change. They also gained experience, which makes it easier for them to actively participate in international diplomacy today than some years ago. As members of the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) they are considered as a "moral conscience" in global climate change negotiations (Barnett/Campbell, 2010), which further strengthened their relevance as strategic partners for the legitimization of other states' policies. It will be difficult for the European Union, for example, to uphold its image as a forerunner in climate protection without some "moral" support by the PICs. Especially for small states, which hardly possess a lot of "hard power" like military capacities, such "soft power" tools are of great importance (Nye, 1990). The close association of the Pacific with the issue of climate change is not always an advantage, though. Sometimes it misleads observers to ignore the engagement of PICs on other important issues and corroborates a view of the countries as weak, vulnerable and as victims.

Secondly, it is also climate change that is a main motivation for enlarging interest of institutional actors in the PICs. In 2011 Ban Ki-moon became the first UN Secretary-General ever to visit the Pacific Islands Region when he participated in the 40th anniversary



Source: UN Photo/Rick Bajornas, 2013.

**Figure 2: Handing-over of the G77 chairmanship to Fiji's interim Prime Minister Voreqe Bainimarama in 2013**

PIF meeting in Auckland and afterwards stopped in Kiribati and the Solomon Islands to get some first-hand impressions on climate change. Ban has put climate change and sustainable development on his personal agenda and also introduced institutional co-operation between his secretariat and Pacific representatives, including regular meetings and joint statements with the Pacific Head of States at the margins of the annual General Debate of the UN General Assembly (UN News Center, 2011). Hence it is no surprise that Ban's image in the Pacific seems to be far more positive than in most other parts of the world (e.g. Kiribati Government, 2012).

Thirdly, the gradual distancing from Australia and New Zealand, pushed forward especially by Fiji, enabled other states to engage more actively with the region. Much of this engagement takes place within international organizations, as this is the most cost-effective way to initiate and maintain diplomatic relations. The PICs are now for the first time on the radar screens of many states that previously did not maintain diplomatic relations with the Pacific at all (Herr/Bergin, 2011). Since several PICs, once again headed by Fiji, question their traditional alliances and start to act more independently from traditional part-

ners, they become relevant as partners on different subjects for a very large number of states. This further adds to the attraction the Pacific receives due to its maritime resources becoming increasingly important given that most oceans are overfished and there is more scope for the exploitation of deep sea resources today.

Fourthly, there is a growing interest in islands states in general. The most visible indication is the decision of the UN General Assembly to declare 2014 to be the International Year of Small Islands Developing States. There is broadening interest in issues such as sustainable management of ocean resources or the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in prone islands. The International Year goes along with the 3rd International Conference on the Small Island Developing States that will take place in September 2014 in Samoa. Since the first two conferences took place in the Caribbean and Africa in 1994 and 2005, the 2014 conference will put an emphasis on the Pacific.

Finally, one state has been particularly active in raising awareness of the Pacific and in motivating its fellow PICs to become more active in global diplomacy. Looking for new partners and ways to compensate the negative impacts from its suspension from the

PIF, Fiji has been very active in international diplomacy over the last years and has been establishing new diplomatic links (Herr/Bergin, 2011). Fiji not only advanced itself at the UN, but also consolidated its image as a Pacific leader. By initiating meetings between Pacific diplomats and representatives from other regions, e.g. from the Arab League, and by fostering cooperation between the permanent representatives of the PICs at the UN, Fiji also integrated its Pacific neighbours in its strategy of international activity (Herr/Bergin, 2011). Fiji's approach in international diplomacy totally differs from that of many neighbouring PICs. While many of its Pacific neighbours still strategically reinforce their image as being tiny, isolated, powerless islands that will not harm anyone, Fiji is portraying itself as a powerful actor that carries global responsibilities. This became particularly evident when it took the lead of the G77 and issued many statements on behalf of this group that comprises about two thirds of the UN membership (Islands Business, 2014). In 2011, Fiji even considered a campaign for the UN Security Council. Fiji backed its standing and record in international relations by further expanding its involvement in international peacekeeping missions. The country more than doubled



its contribution to international peacekeeping missions in 2013 by sending 500 soldiers to the Golan Heights to replace European forces that were withdrawn due to the ascending risk created by the civil war in Syria (UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations, 2014). There is no doubt that Fiji, like many other troop-contributing countries, benefits financially from the deployment of soldiers to peacekeeping missions (Firth/Fraenkel, 2009). At the same time it seems that Fiji considers its contribution also as an integral part of its strategy of international activity, trying to legitimize its claims for greater Fijian involvement in international politics with reference to its record in peacekeeping (e.g. Fiji Mission to the UN, 2012).

## Conclusion & outlook

Oceania and its political structures are changing. So is the perception of the PICs internationally. Regional and global dynamics, many of them closely interrelated, changed the patterns of regional and international diplomacy tremendously and are likely to continue in future. Many of these changes were driven by Fiji. Therefore, the region will reach an important crossroads for the future development of regional cooperation in 2014. Fiji proceeds in the preparation of democratic elections that are scheduled to take place in September 2014 and the sanctions imposed by the PIF will be lifted once a democratic government is elected. Over the last year Australia and New Zealand already softened their sanctions against Fiji. It is not unlikely that these recent dynamics are just underway to arrange the next transformations to the regional system that have the potential to once again create a completely different situation to the one that can be observed at the moment. If Fiji starts to collaborate with the PIF again instead of working against the institution, the ascended international visibility of the PIF may benefit the entire region. At the same time it is hardly conceivable that Fiji will let its traditional partners take away its

strengthened engagement at the international level, which also encouraged other PICs to reinforce their activities. Hence, apart from future regional developments, it can be anticipated that the PICs will play a greater role in international organizations such as the UN in the future, because they now claim to enjoy active participation in international society. As Jeanne A.K. Hey puts it, "states are deemed small not by any objective definition, but by their perceived role in the international hierarchy" (Hey, 2003: 3).

## Acknowledgement

The author is deeply grateful to Andreas Holtz, Matthias Kowasch and John Burton for advice, assistance and comments.

## References

- Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (2004). *Australia and the origins of the Pacific Islands Forum*, Canberra
- Asian Development Bank (2005). *Toward a New Pacific Regionalism – An Asian Development Bank-Commonwealth Secretariat Joint Report to the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat*, Manila
- Barnett, J. and Campbell, J. (2010). *Climate Change and Small Island States – Power, Knowledge and the South Pacific*, London and Washington D.C., Earthscan
- Blatt, H. (2011). *Das Pacific Islands Forum. Eine völkerrechtliche Annäherung an Institutionalismus und Regionalismus in Ozeanien*, Köln, Carl Heymanns Verlag
- Crocombe, R. (2008). *The South Pacific* (7th Edition), Suva, University of the South Pacific, IPS Publications
- Crocombe, R. (2007). *Asia in the Pacific Islands: Replacing the West*, Suva, University of the South Pacific, IPS Publications
- Crocombe, R. (1976). *The Pacific Way – An Emerging Identity*, Suva, Lotu Pasifika Productions
- Fiji Mission to the UN (2012). *Statement by H.E. Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation Ratu Inoke Kububola*, New York, General Debate of the 67th Session of the UN General Assembly
- Firth, S. and Fraenkel, J. (2009). *The Fiji military and ethno-nationalism: Analyzing the Paradox. The 2006 Military Takeover in Fiji – A Coup to end all Coups?* Canberra, Australian National University, ANU E Press
- Haas, M. (1989). *The Pacific Way – Regional Cooperation in the South Pacific*, New York, Praeger Publishers
- Hasenkamp, O. (2011). *Das Pacific Islands Forum* (Dossier Nr. 96), Neuendettelsau, Pazifik-Informationenstelle. <http://www2.pazifik-infostelle.org/uploads/PIF.pdf>
- Herr, R. and Bergin, A. (2011). *Our near abroad. Australia and Pacific islands regionalism*, Barton, Australian Strategic Policy Institute
- Herr, R. (1985). *The Future of Pacific Regionalism*, Honolulu, Pacific Islands Development Program
- Hey, J. A. K. (2003). *Introducing Small State Foreign Policy. Small States in World Politics – Explaining Foreign Policy Behaviour*, London, Lynne Rienner Publishers
- Islands Business (2013). *Fiji will send 380 troops to Golan Heights*. <http://www.islandsbusiness.com/news/solomon-islands/1772/fiji-will-send-380-troops-to-golan-heights/>
- Islands Business (2014). *Fiji to hand over G77 chair*. <http://www.islandsbusiness.com/news/fiji/4122/fiji-to-hand-over-g77-chair/>
- Jayaraman, T. K. (2013). *Regional Integration in the Pacific. Comparative Regionalisms for Development in the 21st Century*. Farnham, Ashgate Publishing
- Kiribati Government (2012). *Statement by H.E. President Anote Tong*, New York, General Debate of the 67th Session of the UN General Assembly
- Moore, C. (2007). *External Intervention: The Solomon Islands Beyond RAMSI. Security and Development in the Pacific Islands – Social Resilience in Emerging States*, Boulder, Lynne Rienner Publishers
- Neemia, U. F. (1986). *Cooperation and Conflict – Costs, Benefits and National Interests in Pacific Regional Cooperation*, Suva, University of the South Pacific, Institute for Pacific Studies
- Nye, J. S. Jr. (1990). *Soft Power. Foreign Policy*, 21, 153-171
- Pacific Islands Development Forum (2014). *Website Profile*. <http://pacificidf.org>
- Radio New Zealand International (2011). *Asian group of nations at UN changes its name to Asia-Pacific group*. <http://www.rnzi.com/pages/news.php?op=read&id=62791>
- Shibuya, E. (2004). *The Problems and Potential of the Pacific Islands Forum. The Asia Pacific: A Region in Transition*, Honolulu, Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies
- Tarte, S. (2013). *Pacific Islands Brief, A New Regional Pacific Voice? An Observer's Perspective On The Pacific Islands Development Forum (PIDF)*, Honolulu, Pacific Islands Development Program. [http://pidp.org/pireport/PIBriefs/pib4\\_tarte.pdf](http://pidp.org/pireport/PIBriefs/pib4_tarte.pdf)
- UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations (2014). *UN Mission's Summary detailed by country*, New York. [http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/contributors/2014/mar14\\_3.pdf](http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/contributors/2014/mar14_3.pdf)
- UN News Center (2011). *Joint statement of Pacific Islands Forum Leaders and the Secretary-General of the United Nations*, New York. [http://www.un.org/apps/news/infocus/speeches/statments\\_full.asp?statID=1286](http://www.un.org/apps/news/infocus/speeches/statments_full.asp?statID=1286)

**Corresponding author: Oliver Hasenkamp [oliver.hasenkamp@pazifik-netzwerk.org] is currently Vice-Chair of the German Pacific Network. He studied Political Science (B.A. and M.A.) in Berlin, Potsdam and Auckland and holds certificates on "Climate Change Diplomacy" and the "Diplomacy of Small States" by DiploFoundation.**