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‘Charting its Own Course’: A paradigm shift in Pacific diplomacy¹

H.E. President Anote Tong

Our Pacific countries have come a long way as communal societies. Since the beginning of time, we began as very insular, traditional communities living together and sharing resources available to us from nature, until our recent history when we came into contact with the outside world through whalers, traders and missionaries, among others. This contact introduced our societies to the outside world, and there began our engagement in international relations, which has become so globalised and interdependent that we no longer can live in isolation. What happens in other parts of the world affect the lives of our communities. Climate change, world economic crises, food and fuel prices, conflicts and others are just some examples of the interdependent nature of the world we live in today. As we progress further into the 21st century we see the value of replicating communal systems at the regional and international levels as crucial to our advancement as a region and as a people.

¹ Keynote Address by President of Kiribati at the Launch of the Pacific International Relations Forum of the School of Government, Development and International Affairs of the University of the South Pacific, Holiday Inn, Suva, 9 October 2012.

I believe relationships, including international relations, are always about people. Yes, textbooks may define international relations as relations among states but what are states without people? International relations is therefore about managing relations among the peoples of our region and of our world. And, depending on how well we manage our relations, it is about living in harmony or otherwise with each other. It should be about helping each other. But we know very well from experience that that is not always the case.

I have just come back from the 67th United Nations General Assembly, the premier venue and forum for international relations, where I had the opportunity to meet, engage and relate with fellow leaders from around the world and from our region. We were all there to share our challenges and to share our visions on how this could be a better world for all.

But the question is: How effective is such a forum in dealing with global issues which require credible solutions? Do we really engage in dialogue with each other and do we really listen to each other's stories? As nation states we gather in New York every year to tell our own individual stories, and to listen, and assess who will deliver the most provocative statement this time. The challenge is how to get the world to not only hear our stories but support our efforts in delivering on those stories — that is, in making this a better and more secure world for all.

I do not pretend to be able to answer these questions, but I shall be happy to share with you my own experiences at the different UN meetings as well as within the region itself and elsewhere. At the last general assembly, I was very happy to note a number of developments which indicated the increased engagement of our region in some significant groupings within the United Nations: the Republic of the Fiji Islands is Chair of G77 and China, a grouping which is an influential negotiating block within the United Nations system; the Republic of Nauru is Chair of the Alliance of Small Island States, another influential negotiating group within the United Nations system; and the Independent State of Samoa will be hosting the Global Small Island Developing States Conference in 2014 — all demonstrating that even small island states can be relevant in international affairs.

In 2011 and this year we also had high-level visits into our region from the UN Secretary General: to the Solomon Islands, Kiribati, and then to the Pacific Islands Forum Meeting in Auckland. There were also visits from the European Union President, the Vice-Minister from the People's Republic of China, the Foreign Minister from Russia, and more recently the US Secretary of State. All these visits clearly indicate interest on the part of these countries in engaging with our region.

This is a new experience for our region and, quite frankly, I for one have not been able to fully analyse the reason for this new level of engagement on the part of these countries, and the implications for our foreign relations as individual countries and as a region. I must, however, be honest in saying that I find these initiatives most welcome indeed and worthy of close scrutiny. It is nice to be relevant.

But as we focus our attention on our relations beyond our region, we need also to look at how we relate with each other within our own region. There can be no doubt that there is greater strength in regional solidarity. This has been clearly demonstrated in many areas, including regional fisheries, trade negotiations, environmental management, climate change, and so on. But let me refer to the more recent initiative on ocean management — the Pacific Oceanscape. This was initiated in 2009 but is already gathering such strong momentum, reaching global proportions by the Rio+20 UN Conference on Sustainable Development with the launch of the World Bank initiative on Global Partnerships for Oceans on the margins of that conference.

Following the designation of marine protected areas (MPAs) by a number of Pacific countries, it was considered that, rather than embarking on fragmented management of these MPAs, it would be logical to link them up in order to coordinate and share experiences in their management — hence the Pacific Oceanscape. Since its formal endorsement by the Pacific Islands Forum in 2010, several countries have declared new and increasingly larger MPAs, including Cook Island, New Caledonia, Tokelau, and Australia. Other Pacific Island countries are also exploring their options for doing the same. However, the point that I wish to make here is that even though we may be small island states, we are large ocean states, and with a great deal more relevance in international affairs than we realised. The Pacific Ocean under the jurisdiction of Pacific Island countries is a significant portion of the earth's surface, and I believe it is important to keep reminding ourselves of this fact, especially in our foreign policy analysis.

The last issue on the international agenda that I wish to touch on is climate change. I have deliberately left it till last, because it is by far the most challenging issue in international relations, one which threatens the survival of a number of countries within our region and beyond, and indeed the planet as a whole. I have no desire to delve into the science except to say that every time new science comes up it is more alarming than the last one. The scenarios put forward guarantee that some countries will not have much of a future even if greenhouse gas emissions were reduced to zero. So that poses serious challenges for countries like Tuvalu, Marshall Islands, Kiribati, etc.

I have been quoted as saying many things about adaptation measures in response to the impacts of climate change. I have, time and time again, expressed my deep disappointment at the apparent lack of care by the many countries which can do the most to do something about this global scourge. I have even questioned the effectiveness of our international governance system in dealing with what is unquestionably an issue of survival which can only be addressed at the international level. How can we, in all conscience, and with all the science available to us, continue to regard this issue as a matter of sovereign right? Until we as a global community can commit to addressing this greatest moral challenge, there can never be any credibility or sincerity in any of our other initiatives.

Tonight's launch is timely, for I believe the Pacific is now entering a new phase — a new paradigm shift where the Pacific needs to chart its own course and lead global thinking in crucial areas such as climate change, ocean governance, and sustainable development. For a long time, we have been branded as 'small island developing states', since we emerged into the global stage as independent and sovereign states. Our mindset and vision of ourselves and the world has been influenced by this doctrine. More often than not, we see a world where developed countries will continue to dominate global politics and economics, whether we have a say in it or not. How much longer must we continue to remain pacific? Our very survival is in question.

Therefore, the message I wish to leave with you excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, but most especially with our Pacific International Relations Forum, is that we have no choice but to engage even more aggressively internationally, because the key to our survival will depend on whether international action is taken on climate change or not. I also wish to add that our strength is in our solidarity. We can and must continue to work diligently together to influence world opinion on these issues, because they matter to us.

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