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Fiji's Emerging Brand of Pacific Diplomacy: A Fiji government perspective

Litia Mawi

In a variety of ways, Fiji's regional presence in the Pacific has gradually yet progressively evolved since it gained independence from Great Britain in 1970. However, it is during this past decade — since the launch of the national initiative to 'Build a Better Fiji for All', through the People's Charter for Change, Peace and Progress (PCCPP) in 2007 — that Fiji's mark of true independence as a sovereign nation has intensified. The charter set in motion a national mindset that a common and equal citizenry is the only foundation upon which a modern, democratic Fiji can be sustainably developed. Vigorously but steadily nurtured, that ideal image will blossom into a Fiji that showcases the richness of its many cultures, traditions and histories.

Such a national mindset has, over this past decade, inevitably enhanced Fiji's global integration and engagement in international relations, through an asserted posture of self-determination that cautiously respects the sovereignty of others by being 'a friend to all and enemy to none' in the entire global family of nations. In retrospect, Fiji's post-2006 diplomatic isolation by traditional allies was the needed impetus for it to explore and maximise new opportunities, such as the 'look and engage north' policy, and to broker new partnerships beyond familiar spheres of interest.

It is among Fiji's silent aspirations that this bold and unwavering stance will make some imprint on the ambitions of the smaller Pacific Island developing states and territories and their relationship with Pacific development partners, to whom they are implicitly subordinated through colonial ties and obligatory mindsets.

During this blossoming period, Fiji's most notable presence at a sub-regional level was through the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG). During Fiji's chairmanship of the MSG, over the two years 2012–2013, culminating in the 25th silver jubilee celebration, it promoted the principles of self-determination and economic growth with equity. It also promoted inclusivity by encouraging the recognition of associate member states.

At a global level, Fiji's contribution to global peace and security has been active since 1978 in the United Nations peacekeeping activities (now evolved into peace-building) in various versions of international unrest. Such active participation has showcased to the world a breed of Fijian soldiering and policing renowned for lending their professional attitude and personality to the task of building bridges across human divides in adaptive ways.

Also at a global level, Fiji's chairmanship in 2013 of the Group of 77 plus China, the largest voting bloc in the United Nations, motivated Fiji to lead by example in advocating south–south cooperation (SSC) in the Pacific, by becoming a development partner to smaller Pacific neighbours thereby demonstrating to the international community Fiji's distinctive brand of responsible global citizenship.

What have been some of the major highlights in the last six years? Following Fiji's suspension from the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) in 2009, Fiji has capitalised on the subsequent detachment from traditional friends to venture onto new turf through a 'look and engage north' policy; strengthening ties with Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS); and new accreditations to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), and other international networks, where there are no political conditionalities, but where there are shared values in the sovereign equality of states and mutual respect for domestic jurisdiction within such states.

Engaging with the Pacific

At a regional level, following Fiji's suspension from the Pacific Islands Forum in 2009, Fiji committed itself to remaining productively engaged with the Pacific by hosting three Engaging with the Pacific (EWTP) meetings in 2010–2012. It was at the third EWTP in 2012 that the Pacific leaders in attendance made

a decision to establish the Pacific Islands Development Forum (PIDF). As stated by Fiji Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama when he opened the inaugural PIDF summit in 2013:

... the 2012 EWTP Communiqué endorsed the convening of the Pacific Islands Development Forum for the purpose of engaging leaders from key sectors in implementing green economic policies in the Pacific Small Islands Developing States (or PSIDS).

Why do we need a new body, a new framework of cooperation? Because the existing regional structure for the past four decades — the Pacific Islands Forum — is for governments only and has also come to be dominated only by a few. In too many instances, it no longer genuinely represents our interests and needs.

We want to stand up as Pacific islanders and with one voice send a clear message to the world at large; that Pacific-SIDS are vulnerable and face unique sustainable development challenges.

Since the very first EWTP meeting in 2010, Fiji has established MOUs with seven Pacific Small Islands Developing States (PSIDS): Kiribati, Tuvalu, Solomon Islands, Nauru, Republic of the Marshall Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, and Vanuatu. These MOUs highlight the replicability of development experiences amongst PSIDS, and the need to move away from the archaic notion of aid to one of partnership and collective self-reliance. Any specificities for individual PSIDS are facilitated under separate Memorandum of Agreements, such as for the Fiji Volunteer Scheme and other emerging modes of technical assistance that capitalise on human resources capacity building. The 'perfect fit' of Fiji's skills and technologies with the needs of these PSIDS arises from the lower costs and greater appropriateness of skills and expertise available in Fiji compared to neighbouring locations. For example, a capacity building program for PSIDS officials would be far more cost effective conducted in Suva or Nadi than in Tokyo, Sydney or Auckland.

These specifically tailored Fiji–PSIDS Development Cooperation MOUs (and MOAs) are focused on nine areas of development cooperation:

- bilateral trade and investment;
- education, youth and human resources development;
- labour mobility;
- immigration;
- commerce, retail and taxation;
- fisheries cooperation;
- air and sea transportation;
- health and pharmaceuticals; and
- climate change, environment, security and energy.

These Fiji–PSIDS south–south partnerships fall neatly within the global framework for Small Island Developing States (SIDS)-specific cooperation under the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS). Nauru is the current AOSIS chair through its Permanent Representative to the United Nations (PRUN). The AOSIS representatives are the AOSIS PRUNs, including the PSIDS PRUNs based in New York. The global framework for SIDS cooperation also reflects the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs): 2000–2015, the Barbados Plan of Action (1994), the Mauritius Strategy (2004) and the S.A.M.O.A. Pathway (2014). In due course, they will also reflect the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) — post-2015 development agenda.

Within these south–south frameworks, the recurring global themes for SIDS-specific cooperation include response and resilience to natural disasters, climate change adaptation, sustainable development, maritime resources (fisheries and deep sea mining), investment and public–private partnerships, people-to-people exchanges, capacity building, the MDGs acceleration framework to 2015, and the emerging SDGs — post-2015 sustainable development agenda.

South–South Cooperation

SSC is used to describe the exchange of resources, technology, and knowledge between developing countries, and is universally promoted as an essential cross-cutting mechanism designed to deliver capacity building and technology support activities in developing countries and regions of the south. SSC can also complement north–south cooperation to enhance technical, financial, scientific and technological exchanges and innovations for development.

SSC received considerable attention as a philosophy for development during the 1960s and 1970s, when developing countries, coming out from under the yoke of colonisation, were struggling with poverty and underdevelopment. A lack of financial and technological resources and western apathy forced them to look to collective self-reliance as an engine of growth. The most significant platform for SSC is G77 plus China which was originally formed by 77 countries in 1964, and which now has 134 developing countries of the ‘south’. SSC suffered a setback during the late 1980s and the 1990s, however, as a large number of developing countries faced financial crisis against the backdrop of declining resource flows.

The launch of the MDGs in early 2000 has given a new impetus to SSC. SSC is today a vital component of the international development fabric as the G77 plus China members increasingly recognise that solutions to many of the development challenges they face are better addressed through partnerships between and amongst themselves. We can only hope that, in the same manner that the MDGs

provided an impetus for SSC to be invigorated post-2000, it should pick up pace again at the upcoming launch of the SDGs at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in September 2015.

As implied briefly above, the binding characteristics of SSC between Fiji and PSIDS include the replicability of development experiences amongst PSIDS — partnership and solidarity for development, rather than development assistance/aid. The appropriateness of Fiji's skills and technologies arises from a number of reasons including:

- (i) a backdrop of similar factor endowments — for example, labour abundance and relative capital scarcity;
- (ii) solutions are more labour intensive rather than automated technology;
- (iii) a similar state of basic infrastructure — for example, telecommunication technologies not requiring air conditioning, etc.;
- (iv) expertise is attuned to similar geo-climatic tropical conditions — for example, the proficiency required for food preservation in tropical settings;
- (v) technologies and expertise are scaled down to size of markets in smaller PSIDS rather than the mass production skills in industrialised countries; and
- (vi) technologies and expertise available are cost effective, having been adapted in view of low income consumers in PSIDS.

Over this past decade of such developments, Fiji now views the Pacific as distinctly different from the world's understanding of PSIDS. Fiji now asserts the position that all PSIDS are sovereign nations whose views and preferences should not be overwritten by any external lenses that are not willing to align to Pacific aspirations and self-determined priorities, and that the time has come for a distinctive and united PSIDS voice.

It is only with this view and end in mind that Fiji — or any other Pacific development partner for that matter — will be able to genuinely contribute to development initiatives and aspirations through targeted development cooperation that is customised to the felt and expressed needs of her neighbouring PSIDS.

Fiji is exploring newer modes of partnership where existing development partners of PSIDS become the triangular/trilateral partner to initial bilateral partnerships between Fiji and the smaller PSIDS. Triangular cooperation, at a very general level, involves two or more developing countries in collaboration with a third party, typically a developed country government or organisation, contributing to the exchanges with its own know-how and resources. Fiji's search for triangular development partners in the Pacific setting is particularly

in the areas of human resources and institutional capacity building in the agriculture, fisheries and tourism sectors — these being the three sectors in any PSIDS that are capable of producing tradeable, exportable commodities — as well as the enabling sectors of transport (both sea and air) and energy. There is also the emerging sector of deep sea minerals, which is seen by Fiji as an area of potential collaboration with developed triangular partners.

The Way Forward: Strengthening the PIDF

So what is the way forward for Fiji's Pacific diplomacy? Following successful democratic elections in 2014, Fiji has an opportunity to further strengthen its 'hub of the Pacific' role in developing SSC through the PIDF. Inaugurated in August 2013, PIDF is the first platform in the Pacific focusing specifically on green economies and sustainable development in the series of Rio+20 Global Agenda on Sustainable Development. Fiji views the PIDF as the only forum that will truly represent the voice of the PSIDS on the sustainable development issue as the global community prepares for the implementation of the SDGs.

The inclusion of the private sector and civil society in the PIDF not only guarantees explicit commitment and civic ownership to green economic growth in PSIDS but also launches a new era of regional cooperation through genuine partnership and dialogue between governments, civil society groups, and the business community. These crucial groups had hitherto been excluded from PSIDS regional decision-making processes.

A strengthened PIDF will also validate Fiji's hub role in the Pacific and her relations with the smaller PSIDS, provided that all sincere development partners, irrespective of the length and depth of their association with individual PSIDS in whatever capacity, acknowledge their role as partners by aligning to the ownership by PSIDS of their development goals and ideals.

Fiji remains encouraged by the fact that, in addition to PIDF, there is promising potential for PSIDS triangular partners within existing Pacific regional frameworks, including the traditional Pacific partners of Australia, Japan, France, New Zealand, the USA, and the European Union; the MSG; the Council of Regional Organisations in the Pacific (CROP); the Pacific Islands Private Sector Organisation (PIPSO); the Pacific Islands Association of Non-Government Organisations (PIANGO); the UNDP Regional Program for Asia and the Pacific 2014–2017 (which is new, since Asia–Pacific became an official grouping at the UN in 2012); the UN Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF) for the Pacific, 2013–2017; the Korea–Pacific Forum; and, last but not least, Japan through the Pacific Alliance Leaders Meeting (PALM) dialogue. The state visits

to Fiji in 2014 by the presidents of Indonesia and the People's Republic of China, and the prime minister of India — which also included roundtable dialogues with Pacific leaders — are clear indicators that Indonesia, China and India would be willing triangular partners to any SSC between PSIDS.

The undeniable challenge for the Pacific, like any other SSC, is financing. Like all challenges, however, it is also the greatest opportunity for exploring triangular cooperation with the above-mentioned Pacific development partners. It is also an opportunity to explore more innovative financing strategies that emphasise ownership by communities as resource owners if there are to be more sustainable social governance structures. For the immediate future, the apparent challenge is the need to shift the PSIDS mindset away from a focus on vulnerability into more positive and alternative visions for the Pacific in approaches to development, governance, environmental sustainability, security, and social cohesion which would ensure inclusiveness and self-sufficiency amongst all our PSIDS communities.

Fiji's Role as Pacific Hub

Understandably of course, there are lenses and perspectives that question Fiji's role and label as the Pacific hub in political, economic and sociocultural solidarity. Fiji sees the Pacific — not just the South Pacific — as an integrated region that is driven by the shared value of 'collective self-reliance as an engine of growth', and where Fiji has the primary role of being the hub through its geographic location and its more developed state, relative to most other PSIDS. Evidence and reassurance to validate this hub role include Fiji's successful venture into relatively unknown spheres over the past decade and in its strengthening of the economic, political and sociocultural ties that have progressively weaned Fiji off total dependence on traditional partners in a refreshed foreign and trade policy direction. Fiji can develop the capacities of smaller PSIDS who wish to take this sovereignty route.

Other evidence of reassurance and validation include Fiji's election as president of the 2014 UNDP/UNFPA/UNOPS executive board following its chairmanship of G77 plus China in 2013. Founded, as mentioned above, in 1964 by an original group of 77 countries, G77 plus China membership has since increased to 132 over the years, and during Fiji's chairmanship, it admitted Kiribati as the 133rd member nation at the UNGA in September 2013. Not only is the G77 plus China the main voice of the global south on economic and social issues in the UN system, it has boosted the bargaining strength of the south in championing the primary interests of the developing world.

As Fiji asserts her hub of the Pacific role through SSC with smaller PSIDS, it is essential that the core principles of the Paris Declaration for Development Effectiveness are consciously upheld: ownership by PSIDS of their priorities, alignment by Fiji to such priorities, harmonisation by Fiji with other development partners (including triangular partners), managing for results in both outcomes and impacts, and mutual accountability. Triangular partners, on the other hand, should be convinced to no longer ask PSIDS the question, ‘what can we do for you?’, but rather, ‘what can we do to add value to what it is that you are already doing to help yourselves and each other?’.

With the advent of the post-2015 sustainable development goals as the broadest framework for global partnerships — be they south–south, north–south, or triangular — it has to be universally accepted by all players that these much anticipated sustainable development goals can validly build upon regional and national agendas on the one hand, yet on the other be the common denominators and underlying bases for ultimate accountability in responsible global citizenship. Amidst all this cross pollination in global integration and international cooperation, there always will be some duplication and overlap, as humanity zooms in on areas that matter most. Instead of seeing such developments as rivalry and competition, the challenge would be in converting them into complementarities for win-win solutions for all Pacific people.

Inclusion of the Pacific People

At the heart of Fiji’s new regional diplomacy is the notion of ‘Pacific people’, embracing an inclusivity not previously acknowledged or practised in Pacific regionalism. Fiji Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama succinctly explained this notion of ‘Pacific people’ and its importance for future SSC in the Pacific in his remarks at the inauguration of the PIDF in August 2013. Let me conclude by reproducing his explanation of this central concept in Fiji’s new regional diplomacy in full:

Until now, ladies and gentlemen, sovereign governments have largely determined how the Pacific will respond to its many challenges. The small island territories, dependencies and protectorates haven’t had a direct say. And neither have civil society groups and businesses. The people most affected by government decisions — the grassroots and their representatives — have largely been excluded from the decision-making process. Not any longer. The PIDF recognizes that governments do not have all the answers. We cannot merely prescribe solutions to the challenges we face in keeping the Pacific ‘green’ and ‘blue’.

We need to listen more to our people and the common sense towards problem-solving that comes with grassroots participation. We need to listen more to our business communities, whose investment generates the jobs we need to raise living standards and improve the lives of our people.

So for the first time, we are bringing all these stakeholders together to discuss common solutions to our common problems in a practical and holistic way. And we will take those ideas and contribute them to the global debate in other forums — including the United Nations — the Pacific speaking with one voice based on the consensus we reach here.

The world recognises the underlying importance of this approach. In June 2012, governments and civil society groups gathered in Rio De Janeiro for the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development. It concluded that Small Island Developing States have a special status in the debate about sustainable development because of their unique vulnerability. And it said that sustainable development 'can only be achieved with a broad alliance of people, governments, civil society and the private sector, all working together to secure the future for present and the following generations'.

So Fiji's vision is for sovereign governments, territories and dependencies, civil society groups and the business community, forming a grand coalition to protect our environment; to make sure that development is sustainable; to make sure that the common good comes before sectional interests; and that we leave the Pacific to our children and grandchildren in a better state than when we inherited it.

It is unfortunate that certain Pacific countries are not with us. They have chosen to regard the PIDF as a political event rather than grasp its true purpose — which is to address the very real threat that our people face and could be catastrophic if we don't act in a collaborative and unselfish manner. As leaders, we must always put our people first. We are one ocean, one people, seeking common solutions.

This text is taken from *The New Pacific Diplomacy*, edited by Greg Fry and Sandra Tarte, published 2015 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.