

1

Mapping the Blue Pacific in a Changing Regional Order

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Introduction

In the midst of increasing geopolitical competition in Oceania, Pacific Island countries are pushing back on the dominant narratives and cartographies that powerful countries use to frame how the region fits into their global agendas. Central to this resistance is the Blue Pacific narrative, which the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) endorsed in 2017. It provides a counternarrative for Pacific regionalism and a strategy to counter the dominance of global powers. This is pertinent in a rapidly changing regional order where powerful countries compete to map Oceania into their boundaries of influence.

This chapter uses mapping as a framework to examine how the Blue Pacific narrative pushes back on the dominant cartographies by Washington DC, Beijing, Canberra, Wellington, Paris and other hubs of global power. Central to these dominant cartographies is the US-led Indo-Pacific strategy and China's Maritime Silk Road, an extension of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). I argue that the Blue Pacific empowers Pacific Island countries by giving them agency to frame and tell their

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own narratives and map their own spaces and places—their region—in the face of overwhelming global interest by powers who want to draw Oceania into their maps and agendas. Here, I contend that since its endorsement, the Blue Pacific narrative has been successful in asserting the sovereignty of Pacific Island countries, highlighting issues that are important to them and making metropolitan powers conscious of their interests and priorities. It gives Pacific Islanders the conceptual tools to assert themselves in regional and global discussions. The Blue Pacific is therefore both a narrative and a strategy for assertive diplomacy.

Two questions underlie this chapter's discussions and are fundamental to understanding the role of the Blue Pacific in the region's contemporary geopolitics: (i) What are the tension points between the Blue Pacific as a countermap and counternarrative and the Indo-Pacific and Maritime Silk Road as the new geopolitical maps drawn by the US and China? (ii) Can the Blue Pacific, as a framework for assertive Pacific diplomacy, successfully counter the new dominant narratives and cartographies?

Geopolitical mapping in Oceania

Cartographers have long used maps to identify and claim control over geographical, economic, political and social spaces. Consequently, maps are effective tools for projecting power.

They have been deployed to claim territories for colonial control, exert geopolitical, geostrategic and geoeconomic interests, and create and maintain global order and worldviews. In mapping, the power is in the hands of the cartographers—they 'draw' the boundaries and exercise power over what is bounded, underlining the fact that maps are powerful political tools (Harley 2009; Klinghoffer 2006).

Modern states, corporations and other institutions of power deploy maps to make spaces 'legible' (Scott 1998), so that they can be appropriated and controlled. This is done through the mapping of entire regions for geopolitical control as well as locally, such as with the registration of land. But maps do not just create legibility. They also make spaces become invisible by omitting or marginalising them. As Harley points out, 'maps ... exert social influence through their omissions as much as the features they depict and emphasise' (1992:290). For example, geoeconomic maps may emphasise resources and their economic values

and omit villages, people and the cultural values of these resources (Peluso 1995). Geopolitical maps typically highlight the interests of powerful countries and marginalise or omit the interests and priorities of less powerful ones.

Oceania is not new to cartographies. Long before European contact, Pacific Islanders mapped and remapped their landscapes, seascapes and socialscapes. But since the arrival of Europeans, the region's landscapes and seascapes have been mapped and claimed by one colonial power or another. By the end of the 19th century, most of the region had been colonised as powerful countries competed for control of the Islands (Campbell 1989; Douglas 2011; Howe et al. 1994; Matsuda 2012). The colonial boundaries created in the 1800s were later adopted by present-day Pacific Island nation-states when they gained independence. The Islands were also mapped into the subregions of Polynesia, Micronesia and Melanesia, which were envisioned not only as geographical spaces, but also racialised ones (Douglas 2011; Kabutaulaka 2015a).

In the post-World War II period, geopolitical competition in the region was defined largely by the Cold War, especially the strategic denial policy adopted by the US and its allies. This policy denied communist countries, particularly the former Soviet Union, access to the region, which became an Anglo-Francophone lake (Herr 1986). Consequently, Western countries mapped the region into their sphere of influence and gave themselves the 'right' to use the region for their strategic purposes. Great Britain, France and the US used the region for nuclear testing, including Kirimati Island in Kiribati (1957–58), Moruroa and Fangataufa in French Polynesia (1966–96) and Bikini and Enewetak in the Marshall Islands (1946–62) (Firth 1986; MacLellan 2005, 2017). Furthermore, the US and France built and maintained military bases in Guåhan/Guam, Kwajalein in the Marshall Islands, French Polynesia and New Caledonia. At the end of the Cold War, Western countries, including Australia and New Zealand, continued to have a dominant influence in the region.

In the 1990s, another cartographical layer was drawn onto the region: the Asia-Pacific, which mapped the Pacific Islands as part of a broader region and with a focus on economic cooperation. Consequently, the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) was established in 1989. However, it favoured the Pacific Rim countries with larger economies. Apart from Papua New Guinea (PNG), no other Pacific Island country is a member of APEC. In this Asia-Pacific map, Oceania was often treated as an

empty space, or, as Hau'ofa stated, a 'hole in the Asia-Pacific doughnut' (2008:397). In the mapping of the Asia-Pacific, Oceania was drawn into this broad cartography, but at the same time was made invisible or omitted, implying that the region and its people were insignificant and had no agency, and that their places and resources were subject to the control of powerful Pacific Rim countries.

In the late 1990s, another map was drawn, especially for the western Pacific. Australian policymakers and their allies in academia described the region as part of the 'arc of instability' that stretched from Indonesia to Fiji following the conflicts in Bougainville, Timor-Leste and Solomon Islands and the coups in Fiji (Ayson 2007; Dobell 2007). This was not a neutral description of places but a subjective mapping that reflected Australia's geostrategic thinking, which in turn influenced the nature of its relationships with its neighbours—places that Canberra considers Australia's backyard, or its patch. Australia had mapped itself as being surrounded by troubled places that it had a responsibility for because they were within its sphere of influence. In essence, Australia had mapped itself as a centre of stability and power surrounded by an arc of instability.

The aforementioned illustrates how, over the past two centuries, Pacific Islands and Islanders have been drawn into numerous maps. They were never consulted or included as cartographers in these mapping exercises. These maps were not innocuous instruments. Rather, they defined global powers' geopolitical control, divided Pacific Islands and Islanders and severed preexisting relationships. The use of cartographies for geopolitical purposes continues through the present.

But Pacific Islanders have also been engaged in counter-mapping; they use the processes, instruments and power of maps to draw alternative boundaries and give visibility to their priorities. These countermaps include not only physical geographical spaces but also conceptual boundaries or ideas about relationships to spaces, places and each other. Peluso discusses counter-mapping in the forest territories of Kalimantan in Indonesia, where local communities 'appropriate the state's techniques and manner of representation to bolster the legitimacy of "custom" claims to resources' (1995:384). In the following, I discuss how Pacific Island countries utilise counter-mapping as a response to the geopolitical maps that have been drawn by globally powerful countries.

The Indo-Pacific and the Maritime Silk Road

In the past decade, we have seen contending cartographies used to frame geopolitical competition between global powers, especially the US and its allies on one hand and China on the other. At the centre of this are the Indo-Pacific and the Maritime Silk Road. These new terms are not innocent changes in semantics, or an objective exercise in nomenclature. Rather, they are part of a process that invokes a particular way of imagining and relating to the world, in this case to the Indian and Pacific Oceans and the countries in and around them. For powerful countries, these new and contending cartographies embody their global strategies and serve to exert their geopolitical control. They include the Pacific Islands without consulting them or acknowledging their sovereignty and agency.

The push by the US and its allies to replace the term Asia-Pacific with Indo-Pacific attempts to map a large part of the world that includes two major oceans and stretches from the west coast of the US to the east coast of Africa. This Indo-Pacific strategy is part of an attempt by the US and its allies to counter China's increasing and assertive influence in the Indian and Pacific Oceans. It is a geopolitical and geostrategic mapping that evokes interests in and control over a large part of the world.

China's increasing influence led Washington DC to 'rebalance' its foreign policy focus from Europe and the Middle East to the Asia-Pacific. This was reflected in the Obama administration's 'Asia-Pacific pivot' policy. On 17 November 2011, while addressing the Australian federal parliament, then president Barack Obama said:

The United States is turning our attention to the vast potential of the Asia Pacific region ... our new focus on this reflects a fundamental truth—the United States has been, and always will be, as Pacific nation.

Similar sentiments were expressed by then secretary of state Hillary Clinton in an 11 October 2011 article titled 'America's Pacific Century'. In it, Clinton states that 'we are also expanding our alliance with Australia from a Pacific partnership to an Indo-Pacific one, and indeed a global partnership' (2011:4). The term Indo-Pacific is not new. Japan had used it for at least a decade prior to 2010 to frame its diplomatic and development assistance to the Asia-Pacific region as the Free and

Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP). Brewster (2018) discusses how the concept of a FOIP existed alongside Japan's other programs, such as the Bay of Bengal Industrial Growth Belt (BBIGB) and the Asia–Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC). These were avenues through which Tokyo invested in new economic and transportation corridors from the Pacific across the Indian Ocean to Africa.

By the end of the Obama administration, the geopolitical thinking and language in Washington DC had shifted from the Asia-Pacific to the Indo-Pacific—a redrawing of the US's geopolitical map and which countries it had decided to draw in or out. By the time President Donald Trump took office, the idea of the Indo-Pacific as a loosely defined and panoramic perspective of the world covering the Pacific and Indian Oceans had been established. The Trump administration fleshed out the details of the Indo-Pacific. In his speech to the APEC CEO Summit in Vietnam in November 2017, President Trump outlined a 'free and open Indo-Pacific' strategy and a 'rules-based order' (Brewster 2018)—the rules being those established by the cartographers. The US has since rallied support from its allies, especially its quadrilateral partners: Australia, Japan and India (the quad). Washington DC subsequently forged a trilateral alliance with Australia and Japan that focuses on increasing influence in the Pacific Islands. Consequently, through the invocation of the term Indo-Pacific, a huge part of world was mapped and claimed as a sphere of influence. In June 2019, the acting US secretary of defence Patrick Shanahan described the Indo-Pacific as the Department of Defense's 'priority theatre' (Department of Defense 2019). But others have argued that the Indo-Pacific is more than simply a counter to China's influence, that it is not new, nor is it the exclusive preserve of the US foreign policy circle. They point to the support from other countries—not only the quad, but also Southeast Asia countries such as Indonesia and Singapore (Medcalf 2014). Pacific Island countries have been more cautious about joining the Indo-Pacific.

In the past two decades, China has established itself as a global power—at least a global economic power—that challenges the US's preeminence. This is discussed in detail elsewhere (Woodward 2017). China's increasing global influence is partly because of Beijing's own global mapping exercises. Central to this is the BRI—also referred to as the One Belt, One Road—that President Xi Jinping launched in 2013. The BRI maps China's grand strategy for geoeconomic and geopolitical expansions and influence that serve its domestic priorities. This is in line with the 2006

Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party's announcement that its foreign policy 'must maintain economic construction as its centrepiece, be closely integrated into domestic work, and be advanced by coordinating domestic and international situations' (quoted in Wang 2011:74). The BRI integrates China's domestic priorities and international engagements (Wang 2011).

In the Pacific and Indian Oceans, the BRI is represented by the Maritime Silk Road Initiative (MSRI), which resembles the ancient Maritime Silk Road that connected China from Fuzhou in Fujian to different parts of the world, but with an emphasis on connections to Europe. Blanchard and Flint (2017) discuss the origins of the recent reiteration of the MSRI. It focuses on connectivity, including the construction of hard infrastructure projects such as ports, roads and airports. These projects involve different Chinese actors, including the state, state-owned enterprises and private companies. The MSRI underlies Beijing's establishment of itself as a territorial and economic power (*ibid.*). Examples of such projects in the Pacific Islands include the Santo port facility in Vanuatu, the airport terminal, sports stadium and other infrastructure projects in Samoa, and road projects in Fiji and PNG. There have also been investments in natural resource extractions, such as the Ramu Nickel mine in PNG and the bauxite mine in Bua, Vanua Levu, Fiji. The BRI and MSRI paved the way for the cooperation between China and the Pacific Island countries (Xinhua 2018). Henryk Szadziewski's chapter in this collection examines the BRI in the Pacific Islands. Elsewhere, he has discussed the BRI and anticipations for economic development in Fiji (Szadziewski 2020).

Oceania has been drawn into the contending cartographies of the US and its allies and China. While Asian influences in the Pacific Islands are not new and have increased over time (Crocombe 2007), in recent years Beijing's influence has become more prominent. This was particularly evident following the first China–Pacific Islands Development Cooperation Forum in 2006, at which then Chinese premier Wen Jiabao announced Beijing would give US\$492 million (RMB3 billion) in concessional loans to the region's eight Pacific Island countries it has diplomatic relations with. Beijing has backed its assertive diplomacy with financial muscle; its aid to Pacific Island countries has increased in the past decade, making it the second largest donor in the region behind Australia (Brant 2015; Zhang et al. 2019). Most of this aid is in the form of concessional loans (Zhang 2018).

China's increasing influence has generated discussions about its challenge to the dominance of the 'traditional powers'—the US, Australia, France, New Zealand, Great Britain—in the region (see Hanson and Fifita 2011; Henderson and Reilly 2003; Windybank 2005; Yang 2011). But others have also pointed to the complexity of these relationships, Pacific Island countries' agency and how 'new powers' like China provide alternative opportunities for Pacific Island countries (see Porter and Wesley-Smith 2010; Wesley-Smith 2010, 2013). Samoa's Prime Minister Tuilaepa, in commenting on concerns about debts associated with Pacific Islands' relationships with China, said:

Our partners have fallen short of acknowledging the integrity of Pacific leadership and the responsibility they carry for every decision made in order to garner support for sustainable development in their nations ... Some might say there is a patronising nuance in believing Pacific nations did not know what they were doing (Reuters 2018).

Australia and New Zealand have also mapped their interests in the region through 'Pacific Step-Up' and 'Pacific Reset', respectively (Australian Government 2017; New Zealand Government 2018; Wallis and Powles 2018). These initiatives are supported by financial commitments, such as the AU\$2 billion Australian Infrastructure Financing Facility for the Pacific (AIFFP), which aims to boost infrastructure development in the Pacific Island countries and Timor-Leste. The AIFFP is administered by the new Office of the Pacific in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Rajah 2018). Furthermore, Australia offered to pay much of the installation cost for the Coral Sea Cable System, a high-speed communications cable connecting Australia, PNG and Solomon Islands, for the specific purpose of ensuring that the Chinese company Huawei did not get the contract (Remeikis 2018). In the lead-up to the August 2019 PIF meeting in Tuvalu, the Australian Government announced it would commit AU\$500 million to finance climate change adaptation efforts in the Pacific Islands (Lyons 2019a). At the same time, Australia is deepening its strategic cooperation with France in the Pacific, and increasingly views France as a counterweight to China.

Other US allies have also enhanced their presence in the region. Great Britain's 'Pacific Uplift' will see it gain a stronger presence in the Pacific by reopening its high commissions in Vanuatu and Tonga, and opening a new one in Samoa. These will add to the current offices in PNG, Solomon Islands and Fiji. The British High Commissioner in Canberra,

Vicki Treadell, stated, ‘We’re doubling our footprint in the South Pacific ... Britain wants to be full-square alongside Australia and other partners to play our part’ (Crowe 2019). Indonesia, an important US ally in Southeast Asia, launched its ‘Pacific Elevation’ in Auckland, New Zealand, in July 2019 (Radio New Zealand 2019c). In October 2019, Jakarta announced it will start a foreign aid program by 2021 with Pacific Island countries as potential beneficiaries (Radio New Zealand 2019d). Also in October 2019, the US announced its ‘Pacific Pledge’, which includes promises of millions of dollars in assistance to Pacific Island countries (Ewart 2019).

As has been the case in the past, Pacific Island countries were not included in the mapping of the Indo-Pacific and the Maritime Silk Road, or Australia’s Pacific Step-Up, New Zealand’s Pacific Reset, the Great Britain’s Pacific Uplift, Indonesia’s Pacific Elevation and the US’s Pacific Pledge. But Pacific Island countries are uneasy with these geopolitical, geostrategic and geoeconomic maps. Consequently, they have drawn their own cartography—a countermap called the Blue Pacific.

The Blue Pacific

PIF leaders endorsed the Blue Pacific at their 48th meeting in Apia in September 2017. In addressing the meeting, Samoan Prime Minister and then chair of the forum Tuilaepa Lupesoliai Sailele Malielegaoi urged leaders to ‘capture the essence of our Blue Pacific’. He said:

The Blue Pacific will strengthen the existing policy frameworks that harness the ocean as a driver of transformative socio-cultural, political and economic development of the Pacific ... it gives renewed impetus to deepening Pacific regionalism (2017:2).

The Blue Pacific was endorsed ‘as the core driver of collective action for advancing the Leaders vision under the Framework for Pacific Regionalism’, which was adopted in 2014 (PIF Secretariat 2017:3). PIF leaders also ‘recognised the Blue Pacific as a new narrative that calls for inspired leadership and a long-term Forum foreign policy commitment to act as one “Blue Continent”’ (ibid.). The communiqué commented on regionalism, identity, the centrality of the ocean and the responsibilities that Pacific Island governments and peoples have to the region and the world.

I propose here that the Blue Pacific has two aspects: a narrative and a strategy. Below, I examine these features, drawing from contemporary and past conversations. I also note that while the term Blue Pacific is relatively new, the ideas underlying it have a longer genealogy.

The Blue Pacific as a narrative

As a narrative, the Blue Pacific offers alternative perspectives about Oceania that are empowering and strengthen regionalism. It also places the Pacific Ocean as central to the region's shared geographies, identities, interconnections and responsibilities. It pushes back on the negative and disempowering narratives that have dominated others' representations of Oceania (Hau'ofa 2008).

First, the Blue Pacific frames the narrative for deeper Pacific regionalism, which was outlined in the Framework for Pacific Regionalism and reiterated in the Blue Pacific. These two documents provide the platform for a renewed commitment to Pacific regionalism and are the core drivers of collective actions (PIF Secretariat 2017:2–3). At the centre of this narrative is the Pacific Ocean, which connects the Pacific Islands and peoples, and is therefore the foundation for collective regional identity and cooperation. Samoa Prime Minister Tuilaepa captured the significance of the ocean:

For the Pacific region and its island countries, the ocean is crucial. Exercising a sense of common identity and purpose linked to the ocean has been critical for protecting and promoting the potential of our shared Pacific Ocean. It is this commonality of the fundamental essence of the region which has the potential to empower the region through collective and combined agendas and actions. The Blue Pacific will strengthen the existing policy frameworks that harness the ocean as a driver of a transformative sociocultural, political and economic development of the Pacific. Furthermore, it gives renewed impetus to deepening Pacific regionalism (2017:2).

The importance of the ocean in defining Pacific identities and framing regionalism is not new. It was fundamental in the early days of establishing regional organisations such as the PIF (formerly the South Pacific Forum) and determining membership (Bryant-Tokalau and Frazer 2006; Fry 1979, 1997). More recently, Pacific Islander scholars have also pointed to the ocean as a source of inspiration, knowledge and identity. For example,

Teresia Teaiwa writes that ‘we sweat and cry salt water, so we know that the ocean is really in our blood’ (quoted in Hau‘ofa 2008). Epeli Hau‘ofa’s seminal paper ‘Our Sea of Islands’ (2008) centres the Pacific Ocean as a source of identity and a pathway that connects the Islands and cultures.

Second, the Blue Pacific narrative presents Oceania as interconnected and vast. It pushes back on stories often peddled by metropolitan countries and their proxies that describe Pacific Island countries in largely negative ways: small, disconnected, isolated, poor and vulnerable. The alternative narrative of the Blue Pacific describes the Pacific Islands as large ocean states or a Blue Continent, rather than small island states. It highlights the fact that Oceania is large, resource rich and interconnected. This is not a mere rhetorical statement. The Pacific Ocean covers one-third of the earth’s surface area and hosts rich fisheries resources, land and seabed minerals, forestry and other natural resources. Furthermore, Pacific Islanders have interacted with each other for thousands of years through trades, wars, intermarriages, etc.

Others have previously expressed these ideas about the region’s vastness and interconnections. Writing in 1949, for example, Albert Norman (1949) asserted that the view that the Pacific Islands were separated and isolated from each other because of the vastness of the ocean was an illusion, created partly because the colonial powers claimed ownership of what he referred to as the ‘visible peaks of the land’ (the islands). He suggested that the ‘first step in “reclamation” has been to free the land of these bonds, to restore the essential regional viewpoint and unity, to overlook the dividing waters, to see the land and its people as united’ (Norman 1949:1). Hau‘ofa (2008) also argued that the ocean connects, rather than disconnects, island countries, and that instead of thinking about the Pacific Islands as small and isolated, there is a need to think of the region as vast because it includes the entire ocean. Hau‘ofa’s paper has had a fundamental impact on academic discussions and has filtered into regional policy discussions as well, as exemplified by the theme of the 2017 PIF leaders meeting: The Blue Pacific—Our Sea of Islands.

Third, the Blue Pacific outlines an expanded concept of security that is inclusive of human security, humanitarian assistance, environmental security and regional cooperation in building resilience to disasters and climate change. This concept encompasses aspects of security such as geopolitics, geostrategy, geoeconomy/spatial and resources. It does not focus exclusively on strategic security.

This concept of expanded security was elaborated in the Boe Declaration, which the PIF adopted in 2018. It commits the PIF countries:

to strengthening the existing regional security architecture inclusive of regional law enforcement secretariats and regional organisations to: account for the expanded concept of security; identify and address emerging security challenges; improve coordination among existing security mechanism; facilitate open dialogue and strengthened information sharing; further develop early warning mechanisms; support implementation; promote regional security analysis, assessment and advice; and, engage and cooperate, where appropriate, with international organisations, partners and other relevant stakeholders (PIF Secretariat 2018:11).

Within the framework of an expanded security, climate change is an issue that Pacific Island countries see as their most important existential threat. The Boe Declaration states that ‘climate change remains the single greatest threat to the livelihoods, security and wellbeing of the peoples of the Pacific and our commitment to progress the implementation of the Paris Agreement’ (PIF Secretariat 2018).

This is in contrast to Australia, the largest member of the PIF, but a major coal exporter that focuses primarily on strategic security, as discussed previously. Examples of this focus include the agreements between Washington DC and Canberra to a joint program to upgrade the Lombrum naval base on Manus in PNG, where it is likely Australian Navy vessels will be permanently based (BBC News 2018; Murphy 2018). In Fiji, where China had been seeking to redevelop the Republic of Fiji Military Force Black Rock facility in Nadi for police and peacekeeping training, Australia intervened with a better offer, which was accepted (Radio New Zealand 2019a; Riordan 2018). Both China and Australia presented Fiji with naval vessels in 2018. The Australians supplied the Republic of Fiji Navy Ship (RFNS) *Kikau* after an extensive refit (Singh 2018), while the Chinese gave a new monitoring vessel, RFNS *Kacau* (Talebua 2018).

Furthermore, Australia demonstrated its Pacific Step-Up with its commitment to pay for much of the installation cost of a high-speed fibre optic communications cable connecting Australia, PNG and Solomon Islands for the specific purpose of ensuring that the Chinese company Huawei did not get the contract (Remeikis 2018). The 4,700-kilometre Coral Sea Cable System was completed in September 2019. In a further sign of the Australian Government’s new focus on infrastructure,

it established the Australian Infrastructure Financing Facility for the Pacific, administered by the Office of the Pacific in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Rajah 2018).

Fourth, the Blue Pacific narrative highlights the responsibilities and custodianship of PIF members, especially to the health of the ocean. The Framework for Pacific Regionalism states that ‘Pacific peoples are the custodians of the world’s largest, most peaceful and abundant ocean, its many islands and its rich diversity of cultures’ (PIF Secretariat 2014). This is reinforced in the Blue Pacific, which seeks to strengthen states with ‘our shared stewardship of the Pacific Ocean and reaffirm the connections of Pacific peoples with their natural resources, environment, culture and livelihoods’ (PIF Secretariat 2017:3). Embodied in this is a recognition of a shared ‘ocean identity’, ‘ocean geography’ and ‘ocean resources’ (Taylor 2017). The Boe Declaration also states that PIF countries ‘affirm our stewardship of the Blue Pacific and aspire to strengthen and enhance our capacity to pursue our collective security interests given our responsibility to sustain our Pacific peoples and our resource’ (PIF Secretariat 2018:10).

Central to Pacific Islanders’ responsibility and stewardship is the issue of climate change. Pacific Island countries have taken leadership on this issue because they are at the forefront of climate change impacts, and because many global powers have not prioritised climate change. On this issue, Australia emerges as, at best, hypocritical. As a member state of the PIF, Australia signed the Boe Declaration, then soon afterwards approved the development of giant new coalfields in the Galilee Basin of Queensland, and continues as the world’s largest coal exporter. Furthermore, the US withdrew from the Paris Agreement, China is the world’s largest investor in coal production, Japan promotes coal-fired power and India is a significant emitter of greenhouse gas. Consequently, PIF members have a responsibility on this issue. In May 2019, during a meeting with PIF leaders in Fiji, the United Nations (UN) Secretary-General António Guterres highlighted the ‘unique moral authority that Pacific Island countries have to speak out on climate change issues’ (Guterres 2019). He said that ‘the continued leadership of the Pacific region will be critical’.

The Pacific Island countries and metropolitan powers differ in what each regards as its central security issue. For metropolitan countries, it is geostrategic concerns, particularly China’s growing influence. Pacific Island countries, on the other hand, emphasise climate change as the most important security issue. These differences came to the fore

during the PIF leaders meeting in Tuvalu in August 2019. Australia was widely criticised for watering down the language in the communiqué, with Pacific Islands leaders calling for urgent action on climate change (Lyons 2019b).

The Blue Pacific as a strategy

As a strategy, the Blue Pacific does two things. First, it draws an alternative cartography by pushing back on the Indo-Pacific and the Maritime Silk Road, the dominant geopolitical maps drawn by global powers. It gives legibility and prominence to the Pacific Ocean and the Pacific Islands. The primary cartographers are the Pacific Island countries, though Australia and New Zealand are included because of their membership in the PIF. This is not just a geographical map. As discussed previously, it is also a mapping of narratives and issues.

Second, it facilitates an assertive Pacific diplomacy and empowers Pacific Island countries to be more emphatic in pushing for issues that are important to them. This is vital given the increased intensity of geopolitical competition in the region (Morgan 2018). As Prime Minister Tuilaepa states:

The sheer fact of our geography ... places the Pacific at the centre of contemporary global geopolitics ... The Blue Pacific provides a new narrative for Pacific regionalism and how the Forum engages with the world (2017:4).

In such an environment, global powers often assume that their values, histories, economic and political systems, interests and security agendas are paramount and worthy of global application.

For most of the post–World War II period, Western countries dominated the region and sought to dictate Island countries’ economic, political and strategic agendas. As Taylor states:

We seem to have found ourselves in a position where some of the decisions about our region are overtly influenced by others. Overdependence on the goodwill of others has left us in a vulnerable state, particularly in relation to the climatic events (Taylor 2019).

Pacific Islanders' assertion of their collective sovereignty is not new. In 1971, the then independent Pacific Island countries established the South Pacific Forum (now known as the PIF) because of their desire to map themselves into regional and international politics and highlight issues they saw as pertinent to the region. This followed Pacific Islanders' dissatisfactions with the colonial powers' dominance of the South Pacific Commission (now the Pacific Community) (Fry 1979, 1993, 2019).

In the subsequent years, the Pacific Island countries have rallied around issues such as decolonisation, anti-nuclear weapons testing (Firth 1986; Maclellan 2017; Regnault 2005; Walker and Sutherland 1988) and resource management, especially tuna fisheries (Hanich et al. 2014). This has led to the numerous regional treaties and declarations that form the foundation of the region's security architecture: the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty (also known as the Rarotonga Treaty) (1985); the Honiara Declaration (1991); the Waigani Convention (1995); the Aitutaki Declaration (1997); the Biketawa Declaration (2000); and the Nasonini Declaration (2002). Others such as the Niue Treaty (1992) and its Subsidiary Agreement (2012) and the Vavau Declaration (2007) focused on tuna management, a shared resource that is economically important to Pacific Island states. This illustrates how Pacific Island countries have been mapping their concerns and interests onto regional and international forums, and on issues that have national, regional and global intersections.

The Pacific Island countries have been relatively successful in their collective efforts: most have gained constitutional independence and two colonial territories—New Caledonia and French Polynesia—are on the UN's Decolonization Committee list; nuclear powers such as the US, France and Great Britain stopped their nuclear weapons testing in the region (Maclellan 2005; Regnault 2005); and there are new initiatives in tuna fisheries management, such as the Vessel Day Scheme introduced by the Parties to the Nauru Agreement (Aqorau 2007).

Despite this, Western powers and their allies continue to dominate the region. Their influence has largely been taken for granted during the post-Cold War period. It was assumed that, with the collapse of the former Soviet Union and no one to challenge the power of Western countries, the Pacific Ocean would become an Anglo-Francophone lake shared with Japan. Pacific Island countries were largely marginalised in the geopolitical discussions (Fry 1993, 2019). US influence is

predominantly in the northern Pacific with the former Trust Territories—Palau, Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), Marshall Islands—Guåhan/Guam and the Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas (CNMI). This includes military bases in Guåhan/Guam, CNMI and Kwajalein in the Marshall Islands (Scott 2012). In the South Pacific, it is American Samoa, an unincorporated territory of the US. The French have influence in New Caledonia, French Polynesia and Wallis and Futuna. Australia and New Zealand are members of the PIF and have immense influence in the South Pacific, though they have some differences in the ways in which they relate to the region in terms of policies and approaches (Wallis and Powles 2018). Japan's influence has largely been through its development assistance programs (Tarte 1998). Tokyo also hosts the annual Pacific Islands leaders meeting, which gives Japan access to Pacific Island leaders. In the past decade, Indonesia has asserted itself as an emerging geopolitical and economic power in the region, especially in Melanesia, though this has often been met with resistance, primarily due to some Pacific Islands countries' concerns about the Indonesian Government's violent reprisals against pro-independence supporters in West Papua since the 1960s (Kabutaulaka 2015b; Lawson 2016). As stated previously, Indonesia has followed Australia and New Zealand by announcing its Pacific Elevation policy (Radio New Zealand 2019b, 2019c), with a plan to become an aid donor by 2021 (Radio New Zealand 2019d).

China's increasing influence has caused a renewed interest in the region. This has given Pacific Island countries the opportunity to forge and strengthen alternative relationships, including with China. In choosing to do so, Pacific Island states have asserted their sovereignty. For example, in September 2019, Solomon Islands and Kiribati severed diplomatic ties with Taiwan and established relations with the People's Republic of China (PRC). This was despite the US and Australia cautioning them not to make the switch. This caution was particularly evident in the case of Solomon Islands. On 9 September 2019, a joint mission from the US, Australia, New Zealand and Japan, headed by US ambassador Catherine Ebert-Gray, met with officials from the Solomon Islands prime minister's office. Records of the meeting indicate that then US Vice President Mike Pence had previously communicated with the Solomon Islands Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare and that there was a mutual agreement that Solomon Islands' decision on whether or not to switch diplomatic relations to the PRC would be held off until the two leaders had met at the margins of the UN General Assembly meeting later that month. Furthermore, the US:

signaled their interest in Bina Harbour with the view to broaden the concept to a commercial and economic Centre for Malaita that goes beyond the current concept of the international wharf and fish facility to include establishment of a Centre for maritime surveillance and training for maritime security, upgrades of road links with Auki and southern part of Malaita, new access road to Aluta basing and extending the submarine cable link from Auki to Bina via terrestrial cable connection. This would be a mega investment and it would be grant funded (Office of the Prime Minister and Cabinet 2019).

Despite this, in an assertive demonstration of its sovereignty, Solomon Islands established diplomatic relations with the PRC on 21 September 2019 (Al Jazeera 2019).

Such assertive diplomacy is also being demonstrated at the regional level in what Fry and Tarte (2015) have referred to as the 'new Pacific diplomacy' and what the former Kiribati president Aote Tong calls a 'paradigm shift' (2015). It is characterised by 'a fundamental shift in the way that Pacific Island states engage with regional and world politics' (Fry and Tarte 2015:3). This assertive Pacific diplomacy has seen Island governments resisting the dominance of Western countries and the establishment of new regional organisations such as the Pacific Islands Development Forum (PIDF) in 2013. The PIDF excludes Australia and New Zealand, promotes inclusiveness of state and non-state entities in regional discussions and has taken leadership on issues such as climate change that are seen as central to Pacific Islanders' concerns (Tarte 2015).

As the PIF Secretariat (2018) stated, the Blue Pacific was part of 'responses to specific shifts in the regional or global security landscape', but also an attempt to reiterate Pacific Islands' agency and the importance of the region's own security architectures in this changing regional order. Further, 'our region has and continues to experience shifts in the security environment since the early 2000's but our regional security architecture has remained largely static' (PIF Secretariat 2018). In its 2017 communiqué, the PIF stated that the Blue Pacific 'provides a political platform that enables Forum Leaders to assert their collective sovereignty over the Pacific Vision into the future' (PIF Secretariat 2017).

Central to Pacific Island countries' diplomatic assertiveness is the issue of climate change, on which they have mapped a path that is fundamentally different from that of Australia, the US and other metropolitan powers.

Pacific Island leadership on climate change is evident not only at the regional level, but also at the international level. For example, in 2017, Fiji took on the presidency of the UN COP 23—the annual Conference of the Parties to the 1992 UN Framework Convention on Climate Change.

Pacific Island leaders have also been critical of the policies and actions of the ‘traditional powers’ in the region. In December 2018, for example, Tuvalu Prime Minister Enele Sopoaga called on Australia to include climate change action as part of its Pacific Step-Up. He warned that Canberra’s inaction could undermine its Pacific pivot, saying:

We cannot be regional partners under this Step-Up initiative—genuine and durable partners—unless the government of Australia takes a more progressive response to climate change ... They know very well that we will not be happy as a partner, to move forward, unless they are serious (Dziedzic 2018).

Similarly, when Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison visited Fiji on 17 January 2019, Fiji Prime Minister Voreqe Bainimarama told him, ‘Here in Fiji, climate change is no laughing matter’. This was in reference to an incident in 2015 when then Australian immigration minister Peter Dutton joked about the fate of Pacific Islanders in the face of climate change, prompting laughter from then prime minister Tony Abbott (Dziedzic and Handley 2019). Bainimarama (2019) went on to highlight the seriousness of the impacts of climate change and was also critical of Canberra putting the interests of the coal industry ahead of the welfare of Pacific Islanders:

From where we are sitting, we cannot imagine how the interest of any particular industry can be placed above the welfare of Pacific peoples—vulnerable people in the world over (Dziedzic and Handley 2019).

In the past decade, climate change has become the rallying issue for Pacific Island states and non-state entities, triggering the region to be more vocal and assertive. It has also influenced the manner in which Pacific Island countries organise themselves and participate in regional and international forums (Carter 2015; Goulding 2015). Climate change has influenced the nature and dynamics of Pacific diplomacy, similar to how, in the 1980s and 1990s, tuna fisheries influenced diplomacy between Pacific Island countries and distant-water fishing nations (Aqorau 2015). For both climate change and tuna fisheries, much of the diplomacy is about defining

and asserting the interests of the Pacific Island countries and pushing back on global powers. This is similar to the assertive diplomacy seen during the height of the anti-nuclear testing era (Firth 1986).

Climate change has also influenced institutional changes within Pacific regional governance (Tarte 2014). The Pacific Small Islands Developing States Group (PSIDS) are more assertive on issues such as climate change. Fry and Tarte (2015:7) point out:

PSIDS has taken on a dramatically new diplomatic role for the Pacific Island states since 2009, to the point where it has all but replaced the PIF as the primary organising forum for Pacific representations at the global level.

Manoa (2015) examines and discusses in detail the roles and assertiveness of PSIDS at UN forums, especially around climate change issues.

On the issue of China's increasing influence, some Pacific Island leaders view Beijing as another development partner, rather than a threat. For example, Vanuatu's Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade Ralph Regenvanu welcomed Chinese aid and investments in his country while admitting the 'extra diplomatic pressure', saying:

It has been good for us. The blow-up has made Australia much more interested. They have committed to build the police college for us. They have committed to picking up the national security standard. They have talked about being much more interested in improving work strategies. They have been talking about improving infrastructure. So, great (Duffield 2018).

He went on to describe China as:

a great partner, I think far more respectful of us as government-to-government diplomatic representatives than Australia. They don't presume like Australia. They can be just as forceful, but Australia has got the gold medal for that one (ibid.).

Similarly, in response to criticism by Australia's then international development minister Concetta Fierravanti-Wells that Beijing was building 'roads to nowhere' and 'useless buildings', Samoan Prime Minister Tuilaepa called the criticism insulting to Pacific Islands leaders, saying, 'The comments seem to question the integrity, wisdom and intelligence of the leaders of the Pacific Islands' (Hill 2018).

The aforementioned demonstrates how the Blue Pacific has mobilised the Pacific Island countries and asserts their views and interests in the face of a changing regional order. As Wesley Morgan pointed out, ‘if traditional powers want Pacific Islands to endorse their vision for a free and open Indo-Pacific they will need to take the concerns of island states seriously’ (2018:4).

The power of the Blue Pacific

This chapter illustrates the power of the Blue Pacific as a framework for regionalism and assertive diplomacy in a changing regional order where global powers are attempting to map their geopolitical interests onto the region. The most dominant maps are the Indo-Pacific and the Maritime Silk Road. Australia, New Zealand, Great Britain, Indonesia and the US have also mapped their interests through initiatives such as the Pacific Step-Up, Pacific Reset, Pacific Uplift, Pacific Elevation and Pacific Pledge, respectively. Pacific Island countries have responded by establishing the Blue Pacific narrative, which frames regional cooperation, pushes back on the geopolitical maps imposed by the global powers and asserts the interests, concerns and priorities of the Pacific Island countries.

The Blue Pacific is both a narrative and a strategy. As a narrative, it frames Pacific regionalism by placing the Pacific Ocean at the centre of Pacific Island countries’ identities and interconnections. It tells a story of empowerment, which describes Pacific Island countries as ‘large ocean states’ and a Blue Continent, rather than small island countries. It also outlines Pacific Island countries’ responsibilities and stewardship, especially to the ocean and taking a leadership role in addressing issues such as climate change. This narrative pushes back on global powers’ focus on strategic security, which has triggered geopolitical competitions, especially between the US and its allies on one hand and China on the other. Instead, it highlights climate change as the central security issue, not only for Pacific Island countries, but globally. This is articulated in the Boe Declaration, which provides for a broad and inclusive definition of security.

As a strategy, the Blue Pacific facilitates Pacific Island countries’ assertion of their views at regional and global discussions. It is what I refer to here as ‘assertive Pacific diplomacy’—Pacific Island countries’ proactive and emphatic assertion of their agendas and priorities. This empowers them

to organise as a region and push back on the dominance of metropolitan powers. Consequently, Pacific Island countries are working to strengthen existing regional organisations and establish new ones, like the PIDE.

In the midst of intense geopolitical competition and the changing regional order, Pacific Island countries have asserted their sovereignty by choosing and strengthening diplomatic relations with whomever they want. They have maintained their rapport with traditional development partners, but have also forged and strengthened relationships with new powers in the region, including China. Ten Pacific Island countries now have diplomatic relationships with China, while four have relationships with Taiwan. Beijing's increasing influence has raised concern amongst the Indo-Pacific alliance. For Pacific Island countries, the choice to have diplomatic relations with anyone is a right, an affirmation of their sovereignty and the fact that they are global players in their own rights. The Blue Pacific narrative gives Pacific Island countries the confidence and the framework to assert that sovereign right.

The Blue Pacific is an example of counter-mapping by Pacific Island countries, drawing their own map in the face of increased geopolitical interest. This is difficult in a region where, despite constitutional independence, Pacific Island countries are economically dependent on metropolitan countries that often use that dependence as leverage to exert political influence. It is a situation where former colonial powers still have significant influence. In some of these Island places, the colonial powers never left. These include the French territories (New Caledonia, Wallis and Futuna and French Polynesia), the US's unincorporated territories and commonwealth (Guåhan/Guam, American Samoa and CNMI) and Chile in Rapanui/Easter Island. For Palau, the FSM and the Marshall Islands, the US still has a lot of influence through the Compact of Free Association agreements. The Cook Islands and Niue are self-governing, but intricately tied to New Zealand. In this situation, where Pacific Island countries' affairs are deeply intertwined with those of metropolitan countries, the entrance of a new power like China could potentially destabilise the dominant regional order, therefore giving Pacific Island countries the opportunity to draw their own maps. In this case, they have drawn the Blue Pacific and used it as a narrative and a strategy to chart alternative futures in a changing regional order.

The power of the Blue Pacific lies in its ability to mobilise Pacific Island countries, strengthen regional solidarity and assert their sovereignty in the international arena. So far, Pacific Island countries have been able to make global powers pay attention to issues that are important to them. Consequently, these countries are mapping the Blue Pacific as an alternative geopolitical map that defines the new regional order.

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