

PART 2

The Pacific



Pacific Islands Forum

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Abstract

The 53rd Pacific Islands Forum was held in Nuku'alofa in the Kingdom of Tonga from 26 to 30 August 2024. Besides the Heads of State and Heads of Government, the Forum was attended by Associate Members, regional organizations, development partners and the UN Secretary-General. The Forum was significant because it discussed the trajectory and direction of the regional architecture. Other issues discussed included climate change, oceans, regional security, health and education. Interestingly, two communiqués were published. The first version included a section in which Pacific leaders affirmed their relations with Taiwan. That section was omitted from the second version which was issued as the correct version of the PIF Communiqué.

Keywords

Pacific – Polycrisis – Security – China – Taiwan

The 53rd Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) was held in Nuku'alofa in the Kingdom of Tonga from 26 to 30 August 2024 and was attended by Heads of State and Heads of Government of Australia, the Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, French Polynesia, the Marshall Islands, Nauru, New Caledonia, New Zealand, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu. Kiribati was represented at Ministerial level because the Forum Leaders Meeting coincided with national elections in Kiribati. Also in attendance were Associate Members and regional organizations and development partners. It is notable that the Forum was attended by the UN Secretary-General,

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António Guterres, who told the Forum that ‘the world needs your leadership’.¹ The opening day of the Forum was marked by rain, flooding, and a magnitude 6.8 earthquake – all of which exemplified the consequences of climate change and the natural disasters that Pacific island countries are experiencing.

The theme for the Forum was “Transformative Resilient Pasifiki: Build Better Now” – highlighting the need to move beyond policy deliberation to policy implementation.² The Chair, Tonga’s Prime Minister Hu’akavemeiliku Siaosi Sovaleni, explained that ‘the vision for a region of peace, harmony, security, social inclusion and prosperity, a *Transformative Resilient Pasifiki*, for our Pacific people to lead free, healthy and productive lives, can only be realized, if we *Build a Better Now*’.³

The then Secretary General Henry Puna highlighted on the 10th of April 2024 that the 53rd Forum ‘sits at a very important juncture in our region’s history’ because it will ‘consider and decide the trajectory and direction of the regional architecture, that underpins and brings to life Pacific regionalism’.⁴ As such, the Forum brought together Pacific leaders to discuss and agree on actions and policies that will benefit the Pacific region. For instance, after adopting the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent and its implementation plan, the focus had shifted to the implementation of the plan to tackle seven themes which are justice and equality, climate change, economic development, and geopolitical and security trends.⁵ Issues discussed included climate change, oceans, regional security, health and education. These themes are interconnected and have been referred to as a polycrisis by Fiji’s Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka.⁶

1 ‘The World Needs your Leadership’, Guterres Tells Pacific Islands Forum, *UN News* (online at 25 August 2024) <<https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/08/1153541>>.

2 Hon. Hu’akavemeiliku Siaosi Sovaleni (Prime Minister of Tonga), Keynote Address at the Launching of the Theme of the 53rd Pacific Islands Forum and Related Meetings (10 April 2024).

3 Hon. Hu’akavemeiliku Siaosi Sovaleni (Prime Minister of Tonga), *Remarks to the 53rd Pacific Islands Forum Leaders Meetings* (26–30 August 2024) <<https://pifilm53.to>>.

4 Henry Puna (Secretary General of the Pacific Islands Forum), *Remarks to the Launch of the Theme of the 53rd Pacific Islands Forum and Related Meetings* (12 April 2024) <<https://forumsec.org/publications/remarks-secretary-general-henry-puna-launch-theme-53rd-pacific-islands-forum-and#:~:text=This%2053rd%20Pacific%20Islands%20Forum,juncture%20in%20our%20region's%20history.&text=It%20will%2C%20amongst%20other%20things,brings%20to%20life%20Pacific%20regionalism>>.

5 ‘2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent’, *Pacific Islands Forum* (Web Page) <<https://forumsec.org/2050>>.

6 Pita Ligaiula, ‘Fiji PM Rabuka Says Unified Response Needed for Security Challenges Facing the Region’, *Pacific News Service* (online at 24 June 2024) <<https://pina.com.fj/2024/06/24/fiji-pm-rabuka-says-unified-response-needed-for-security-challenges-facing-the-region/>>.

In the run up to the 53rd Forum, Pacific Foreign and Economic Ministers met in Fiji to discuss regional issues such as peace and security, progress on the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Ocean, the Review of the Regional Architecture, and the Forum's partnership mechanism.⁷ During the Forum Economic Ministers Meeting, Ministers discussed the draft Pacific Roadmap for Economic Development, which outlined a pathway for deeper regional economic cooperation and integration with the aim of achieving greater regional economic prosperity. In order to achieve this aim, it was highlighted that the region needs to harmonise its systems and processes to generate greater trade flows between PIF member states, support intra-regional labour mobility amongst member states, and encourage private sector investment and increased employment in the domestic economies of member states.⁸ The Leaders had earlier met in Japan, in July 2024 for the 10th PALM meeting.⁹

The unrest in New Caledonia, which was sparked by the reform of the electoral franchise proposed by France, was discussed at the Fiji meeting and the ministers decided to send a PIF mission to New Caledonia before the Forum session. The mission was postponed due to differences between the government of New Caledonia and France on the terms of reference for the mission.^{10,11}

The Forum ended with the release of a Communique that outlined the discussions and goals which were agreed at the Meeting. The Communique of the Forum contains 20 main headings, 75 paragraphs, one Attachment and two Annexes. Among many other things, the Leaders endorsed the Executive Summary of the 2050 Baseline Report, which reports on the current state of regionalism and development in the Pacific through the lens of the seven Thematic

7 Pacific Islands Forum, 2024 *Forum Foreign Ministers Meeting Outcomes Document*, 9 August 2024.

8 Pacific Islands Forum, 'PALM10 Declaration by Pacific Islands Forum and Japan Will Address Shared Priorities' (Media Release, 19 July 2024) <<https://forumsec.org/publications/release-palm10-declaration-pacific-islands-forum-and-japan-will-address-shared>>.

9 Pacific Islands Forum, 'Pacific Leaders Travel to Japan to Build Collaboration at PALM10' (Media Release, 12 July 2024) <<https://forumsec.org/publications/release-pacific-leaders-travel-japan-build-collaboration-palm10>>.

10 Patrick Decloitre, 'High Level Mission to New Caledonia 'Strictly Observational': Pacific Islands Forum' *RNZ* (online at 26 October 2024) <<https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/pacific/531960/high-level-mission-to-new-caledonia-strictly-observational-pacific-islands-forum>>.

11 On 27 October 2024, the Prime Ministers of Tonga, the Cook Islands and Fiji, as well as the Solomon Islands Minister for Foreign Affairs and External Trade, arrived in New Caledonia for a fact-finding mission. The leaders agreed to submit a report at the next Forum.

Areas of the 2050 Strategy (para 10); discussed the progress on the Review of the Regional Architecture (RRA), endorsed the recommendation of phase 2 of the RRA and discussed political leadership and unity, Forum membership and criteria, strengthened regionalism (paras 11 and 13); affirmed their commitment to host COP31 in 2026 in partnership with Australia (para 28); agreed to elevate the issue of sea level rise politically, including at the United Nations General Assembly (para 31); reaffirmed the 2023 Declaration on the Continuity of Statehood and the Protection of Persons in the Face of Climate Change Related Sea-Level Rise (para 32); acknowledged the Advisory Opinion delivered by the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea in May 2024 (para 33); called for the inclusion of sea-level rise as a standalone agenda item in the UNGA and other relevant UN processes (para 34); reaffirmed their support and commitment for the Pacific Resilience Facility, which is the first Pacific-led, member-owned and people-centred climate and disaster resilience financing facility (para 35); reaffirmed their vision for a region of peace and welcomed the alignment of the concept of the Ocean of Peace with the 2050 Strategy, the 2018 Boe Declaration on Regional Security and the 2000 Biketawa Declaration (para 40); tasked the Secretariat to develop the draft concept on the Ocean of Peace Declaration for consideration by Leaders at the 54th Pacific Islands Forum (para 41); endorsed the Pacific Policing Initiative (PPI) and noted the need for further consultation on how Members engage with the PPI (para 42); welcomed Australia's support for the implementation of PPI, including the establishment of a training centre in Brisbane; recognised Papua New Guinea's offer to host Police Officer Training for Members at the Bomana Centre of Excellence; acknowledged the expression of interest by the Republic of the Marshall Islands to host a Regional Policing Centre of Excellence (para 44); and 'welcomed the participation of Members to the ICJ written proceedings with 91 written submissions from States and International Organisations submitted, making this advisory opinion the largest case in the history of the ICJ' (para 70).¹² The United States territories of Guam and American Samoa transitioned from being Forum Observers to Associate Members of the Pacific Islands Forum. Arguably, this will strengthen the position of the United States in the Pacific.

Of particular significance internationally are:

1. The affirmations in paragraphs 31 and 32:

12 Pacific Islands Forum, *Communique of the 53rd Pacific Islands Leaders Forum (Second Version)*, 26–30 August 2024 ('53rd PILF Communique').

31. Leaders **reaffirmed** the 2021 *Declaration on Preserving Maritime Zones in the Face of Climate Change-related Sea-Level Rise*, which affirms that “our maritime zones, as established and notified to the Secretary-General of the United Nations and the rights and entitlements that flow from them, shall continue to apply, without reduction, notwithstanding any physical changes connected to climate change-related sea-level rise”.¹³

32. Leaders **further reaffirmed** the 2023 *Declaration on the Continuity of Statehood and the Protection of Persons in the Face of Climate Change-Related Sea-Level Rise*, which affirms that the “continuity of statehood in the face of climate change-related sea-level rise is consistent with important principles and rights of international law, including the right of peoples to self-determination, the right to a nationality, the protection of territorial integrity and political independence, principles of equity and fairness, the maintenance of international peace and security”.¹⁴

This is all consistent and reinforced by the Falepili Union Treaty between Australia and Tuvalu.¹⁵

2. The Pacific Resilience Facility:

In relation to the Pacific Resilience Facility, it was noted in paragraph 37 that a significant commitment had already been made to the fund by Australia and Saudi Arabia with lesser commitments from China and the US, but was still far short of the target of 500 million US Dollar by 1 January 2026.¹⁶

3. Attachment One:

Attachment one proposes an elaborate Forum Partnership Mechanism designed to systematise the relationship with Forum Partners, of which there are many. This is a response to the burgeoning number of such partners and in particular of the Forum Dialogue Partners, who by some accounts were tending to overshadow the conduct of the Forum’s traditional and core business (see para 13 of Communique and recommendation 14 of Annex A). This matter has been referred to the Forum Officials Committee.

4. Regionalism:

A recurring theme in the communique is that of regionalism. It was adverted to in paras 5 and 6, then addressed more directly in relation to “Regional

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 *Australia-Tuvalu Falepili Union Treaty*, signed 9 November 2023 (entered into force 28 August 2024).

16 53rd PILF Communique (n 12).

Architecture” (paras 11–14 of the Communique and Annex B). This focus is not new. The Pacific Plan¹⁷ had regional aspirations as did its more precise successor, the Framework for Pacific Regionalism.¹⁸ The themes are perennial and they have resulted in the production of many reports, analyses and the like. Para 14 of the Communique, in its endorsement of Annex B, commits the Secretariat to “undertake an in-depth consideration” (Annex B, para 4) of matters relating to the regional architecture, and in particular in connection with “Strengthened Regionalism”, addresses the question “What can be done to balance national sovereignty issues against the potential economic benefits of regional integration?” (Annex B, para 4, iii). Sovereignty is the critical factor and the likely stumbling block to any regionalisation or regional integration. It is currently beyond the pale to envisage any regional authority being empowered to enforce a regional decision.

In 2024, there were two communiqués published. The first version of the Communique included a section in which Pacific leaders affirmed their relations with Taiwan:¹⁹

RELATIONS WITH TAIWAN/REPUBLIC OF CHINA

66. Leaders reaffirmed the 1992 Leaders decision on relations with Taiwan/Republic of China.

The Leaders’ decision on relations with Taiwan/Republic of China was described as follows in the 1992 Communique:²⁰

RELATIONS WITH TAIWAN/REPUBLIC OF CHINA

54. The Forum agreed that the importance of Taiwan/Republic of China as an economic presence in the region justified some form of formal consultative arrangement with those Forum countries which wish to participate. Forum countries propose to institute, therefore, a “Taiwan/Republic of China-Forum Countries Dialogue”. This will take place at the same venue as the Forum, but be separate from the existing post-

17 Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, *The Pacific Plan: For Strengthening Regional Cooperation and Integration* (Papua New Guinea, 2005).

18 Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, *The Framework for Pacific Regionalism* (Cook Islands, 2014).

19 53rd PILF Communique (n 12) 8.

20 Pacific Islands Forum, *Communique of the 23rd South Pacific Forum*, 8–9 July 1992, 75.

Forum Dialogue. Participating countries would do so in their own right and would not represent the Forum as a whole.²¹

The first version of the Communique was taken down after a reaction to paragraph 66 by the Chinese Ambassador to the Pacific, Qian Bo, who spoke to the PIF Chair Mark Brown. Brown subsequently arranged the removal of the offending paragraph. The Forum Secretariat then published a new version of the Communique and stated that that was the 'correct version of the 53rd Pacific Islands Forum Communique'.²²

China's political action and influence at the Forum is reminiscent of an incident that happened during the 49th Forum Meeting, held in Nauru, at a time when the Forum had diplomatic relations with Taiwan. Nauru's President at the time, Baron Waqa (the present Secretary General of the Forum), reprimanded the Chinese delegation when it tried to speak before the Prime Minister of Tuvalu, another Pacific state with ties to Taiwan.²³ These two incidents expose a political divide within the Forum. The Education Minister of Kiribati explained that Pacific island states that are 'affiliated to Taiwan want Taiwan to be included in the Forum' whereas 'the majority are following China' and 'believe that China will be frustrated' by the participation of Taiwan.^{24,25}

This incident raises questions about the manner of operation of the Forum Secretariat. It also gives cause for reflection on the role and status of China at Forum meetings. Who drafted and who signed off on the original communique? It would seem that para 66 was a matter of discussion by the Leaders, but was its insertion formally approved by the group? The answers are not a matter of record. Paragraph 54 of the 1992 communique did little beyond acknowledging that Taiwan could engage in consultations with Forum countries but

21 Taiwan is a development partner for the PIF, participating under the name 'Taiwan/ Republic of China'.

22 Lydia Lewis, "'We'll Remove It': Pacific Caves to China's Demand to Exclude Taiwan from Leaders Communique' *RNZ* (online at 3 September 2024) < <https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/526760/we-ll-remove-it-pacific-caves-to-china-s-demand-to-exclude-taiwan-from-leaders-communique>>.

23 Ben Doherty & Helen Davidson, 'Chinese Envoy Walks Out of Meeting After Row with Nauru President Amid "Bullying" Claims' *The Guardian* (online at 5 September 2018) <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/sep/05/chinese-envoy-walks-out-of-meeting-after-row-with-nauru-president-amid-bullying-claims>>.

24 Lewis (n 22).

25 Currently, three Pacific Island states have diplomatic relations with Taiwan: Tuvalu, Palau and Marshall Islands.

not as part of the Forum nor as part of the then existing post-Forum Dialogue. There may well have been a misunderstanding in the office of the Secretariat about the status of the discussion, and if so, the official clearance of the document was deficient.

The next Forum will take place in Solomon Islands from 8 to 12 September 2025.