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The Changing Paradigm of Pacific Regional Politics

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ABSTRACT

Analyses of recent developments in Pacific regional politics have emphasized the role of ideas and new thinking about how the Pacific should engage in global and regional diplomacy (the so-called 'paradigm shift'). These ideas include the call for regional self-determination, the claim that Pacific island states need to engage more assertively in global diplomacy, the call for a 'genuine Pacific voice' to be heard in global forums, recognition that a 'one region approach' need not be the best approach, the reconfiguring of diplomatic alliances to leverage Pacific island positions better in global forums, and embracing non-state actors as equal partners. The importance of this paradigm shift is that it challenges many prevailing stereotypes and assumptions about Pacific islands diplomacy. It recognizes and facilitates choices and alternatives. It emphasizes the imperative of being proactive and of taking responsibility for the challenges facing the Pacific islands; and being creative in finding solutions. This is a fundamentally empowering transformation. But in order to understand where this might lead, it is necessary to explore where this transformation has so far played out. Case studies at the national, regional and global levels give insights into the impact and potential of the new Pacific diplomacy.

KEYWORDS

Pacific diplomacy; regional politics; paradigm shift; Pacific voice; Alliance of Small Island States; Pacific Islands Forum; Frank Bainimarama; Pacific Islands Development Forum

Introduction

Analyses of recent developments in Pacific regional politics have emphasized the role of ideas and new thinking about how the Pacific should engage in global and regional diplomacy. This so-called 'paradigm shift' can be seen to be part of a more fundamental transition occurring in Pacific regionalism and the Pacific regional order (Tarte, 2014). These ideas include the call for regional self-determination, the claim that Pacific island states need to engage more assertively in global diplomacy, the call for a 'genuine Pacific voice' to be heard in global forums, recognition that a 'one region approach' need not be the best approach, the reconfiguring of diplomatic alliances to leverage Pacific island positions better in global forums, and embracing non-state actors as equal partners (Fry and Tarte, 2015). The importance of this paradigm shift is that it challenges many prevailing stereotypes and assumptions about Pacific regionalism. It is also underpins a potentially empowering

transformation in Pacific diplomacy. However, in order to understand where this might lead, it is necessary to explore where this transformation has so far played out. This article explores case studies at the national, regional and global levels that give insights into the impact and potential of what has been dubbed ‘the new Pacific diplomacy’. It begins with an overview of the ideas and discourse that characterize this paradigm shift.

New Thinking

In a speech in Suva, Fiji, in 2012, the then president of Kiribati, Anote Tong, talked of a number of developments at the United Nations which to him indicated increased engagement by Pacific island states in global groupings, such as the Group of 77 Plus China and the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS). He also noted the increase in high-level engagement with the region by outside powers such as the US, China and Russia. But he also used the speech to drive home the point that ‘as large ocean states, we have a lot more relevance in international affairs than we realized’; and he made the now seminal call for the Pacific to ‘chart its own course and lead global thinking’ in areas such as climate change, ocean governance and sustainable development (Tong, 2015, pp. 23–24).

This echoed what others in the region were articulating at the time. In taking on the role of ‘pioneer CEO’ of the Parties to the Nauru Agreement (PNA) office in 2010, Transform Aqorau challenged the prevailing conventional wisdom that managing relations with foreign fishing powers demanded a common ‘one region’ approach. Speaking with a journalist in late 2010, he had this to say:

There is this perception that everything that is done in the region by Forum members, must be done under the umbrella of Forum bodies ... That somehow if it is not done under the Forum purview it is not legitimate ... Nothing could be further from the truth; the PNA is an assertive expression of self-determination ... For the first time in the history of Pacific politics a small group of countries have come together to set up something for themselves without the assistance of the region’s two metropolitan powers ... (Aqorau, 2010)

Later in the interview he made the following remark: ‘One of the problems we face is that we are too wedded to the status quo and afraid of change, of rocking the boat, and of being independent’. It was subsequently revealed that at the time the PNA was established as a separate, independent body, comprising eight ‘tuna rich’ Pacific countries, it faced fierce resistance from certain quarters (even labelled illegal and in violation of regional policies and declarations). The threat of censure and sanction can be very inhibiting, especially when wielded by those who control the so-called purse strings.

Fiji’s post-coup leaders faced the brunt of censure and sanction, especially after 2009 when Fiji was suspended from the Pacific Islands Forum for failing to return to elected government by May that year. But to their credit they used this as an opportunity to innovate and assert more independence in their diplomacy. Fiji’s new foreign policy orientation was an integral part of the Bainimarama government’s Strategic Framework for Change – the set of reforms that he was committed to implementing before Fiji would return to elected government in 2014.

In 2010, the year these reforms were launched, Fiji’s new diplomacy included seeking membership of the Non Aligned Movement. It announced the setting up of three new embassies – in Indonesia, Brazil and South Africa. It also hosted a visit from a Russian delegation, led by the resident ambassador in Canberra, which aimed ‘to find concrete areas of

cooperation. Meanwhile, Fiji's suspension from the Pacific Islands Forum was contributing to the growing role in the United Nations of the Pacific Small Islands Developing States (PSIDS) group and the diminishing significance of the Pacific Islands Forum bloc (of which Australia and New Zealand were members) as the main representative of the Pacific in international negotiations.

Perhaps most important in 2010 was the gathering at Natadola, in Fiji, of Pacific leaders and representatives, convened by Fiji as the inaugural Engaging with the Pacific Leaders meeting. Only four Pacific island countries stayed away (Samoa, Cook Islands, Palau and Niue). Although written off at the time by some commentators as a 'grandstand for Bainimarama' and as 'guaranteed to fade away', it is this gathering that would be a catalyst and a vehicle for a new Pacific diplomacy, driven by and for PSIDS. Among other things, the Natadola communiqué of 2010 'reaffirmed the special cultural bonds and ties that PSIDS share with each other'; it 'reiterated the need for PSIDS to take a stronger and united position on issues ... that affect the survival of Pacific island countries'; and it highlighted avenues for South-South cooperation within the Pacific.

Fiji's initiative was warmly embraced. Although borne out of necessity or expediency (on the part of Fiji), it was an initiative that underscored what had become all too obvious: 'what PSIDS perceived as deficiencies in the ability of the current model of Pacific regionalism to effectively address key development and governance challenges' (Natadola Communique and Concluding Press Statement, 2010).

It is important to separate to some extent these meetings of the Engaging with the Pacific Leaders (held between 2010 and 2012) and what eventually came out of them (the Pacific Islands Development Forum). It was through these early meetings that a PSIDS identity came to the fore. In this context, it is interesting to note that the term 'the Pacific Way' was rediscovered at this time. Speaking at the Rio + 20 Summit in 2012, Fiji's prime minister declared that:

For Pacific islanders, the Pacific Way invokes dialogue and collaboration in sharing our island heritage, independence, and right to self-governance, as we strive to establish effective communications; strengthen social networks, and promote environmentally friendly sustainable economic development. (Bainimarama, 2012)

When it was inaugurated in 2013, the Pacific Islands Development Forum (PIDF) was described by Prime Minister Bainimarama as 'epitomizing the Pacific Way of consultation and consensus'. While that perhaps reflects a rather romanticized notion, reminiscent of past iterations of the term, there was nothing sentimental or romantic about the tone or agenda of the meeting. Pacific leaders and representatives who attended did so with the knowledge and expectation that things had to change – and with a seeming readiness to embrace alternative pathways. An intervention made at that meeting by the Republic of Marshall Islands Foreign Minister Tony de Brum captured the mood of this gathering. In response to a presentation on sustainable shipping, using wind and sail power, he had this to say:

For too long we have accepted down as normal; we have accepted small as normal; we have accepted prescriptions of our development partners as normal – that we must do what we are told to do, not what we want to do. I came to this meeting in the hope that the PIDF will make up for that deficiency in our development; where solutions to our development problems can be reached quickly without multitudes of expensive consultants. The world needs alternative energy technology. This is something that can fit into the agenda of this meeting. We need to do something new about climate change. It is frustrating to Pacific island countries that hardly anything has been done in this area. This organization can take the lead in that and stop the rhetoric. PIDF must be outcome driven. (Quoted in Tarte, 2015, p. 84)

One way PIDF sought to be more effective and ‘outcome driven’ was by being more inclusive: bringing in the private sector and civil society actors as partners in advancing sustainable development and the ‘Green Economy’. Indeed, one of the main priorities and preoccupations of the architects of the PIDF was devising an appropriate development model – a new development paradigm – for the Pacific: this meant ‘thinking outside the box’; and moving away from ‘business as usual’.

Transformative Power?

The paradigm shift described above challenges some prevailing assumptions and stereotypes about Pacific diplomacy. It emphasizes the imperative of being proactive and of taking responsibility for the development challenges facing the Pacific islands; and being creative in finding solutions. It recognizes and facilitates choices and alternatives in diplomatic partnerships, strategies and platforms. This reflects a broader ‘discourse of change’ that has underpinned the transformation of the Pacific regional order (Tarte, 2014). The following discussion explores the impact and outcomes of this paradigm shift, using case studies from the national, regional and global levels.

Fiji exemplifies, at a national level, the confidence and assertiveness of this new diplomacy, as well as the tangible results it has yielded. There is no doubt that Fiji is riding high on the international stage. Fiji will preside over the UN General Assembly in 2017 (the first Pacific island nation to do so). It was a founding member of the Ambassadorial Group of Friends of Oceans and Seas, advocating a triennial summit to oversee implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 14 (and it will co-host the first high-level summit in New York in 2017). In Geneva, at the World Trade Organization, and in London, at the International Maritime Organization, Fiji is seeking to have an impact. It is vying for membership of the UN Human Rights Council for a two-year term beginning in 2018 (Bainimarama, 2016).

Following its return to elected government in 2014, Fiji hosted in quick succession the leaders of two of the world’s emerging powers: the president of China and prime minister of India. Other Pacific island leaders were invited by Fiji to these meetings. There are now regular meetings on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly between PSIDS and Russia’s foreign minister. What this points to is not just that Fiji has friends in high places. Fiji has also helped create a situation where Pacific island states’ interactions with major (non-Western) powers take place without the mediation of Australia or New Zealand. Indeed, Fiji – and other PSIDS – have exposed and countered what was effectively a double-standard in Australian and New Zealand diplomacy: that while it was acceptable for Australia and New Zealand to have economic and political ties with these non-Western powers, the same did not apply to the Pacific island states. This does not mean that Chinese or Russian engagement with the Pacific does not still stir controversy or concern – both within the region and on the Rim. What it does mean is that the old – essentially Cold War – paradigm no longer dominates or dictates regional affairs (Powles and Souza-Santos, 2016).

Fiji’s return to the Pacific Islands Forum – albeit not at leaders’ level – has also been on its own terms. While it is no longer seeking to undermine the Pacific Islands Forum, its selective re-engagement is having an impact on the outcomes of regional diplomacy. This is most evident in negotiations for a regional free trade agreement with Australia and New Zealand, known as PACER-Plus. Since being readmitted to the negotiations in 2014, Fiji has

resisted pressure from Australia and New Zealand to conclude an agreement until Australia and New Zealand show more flexibility on key issues. Although the Pacific Forum leaders' at their summit in 2016 made a commitment to finalize negotiations by year's end, at the time of writing both Papua New Guinea and Fiji (who together account for 80% of Forum island country imports from Australia and New Zealand) had effectively withdrawn from the process. Papua New Guinea had decided that they had nothing to gain from PACER-Plus, while Fiji appeared to be making a tactical move to extract more concessions from their developed partners. This reflects a broader assertiveness by Pacific island countries in regional and global trade negotiations; a strategy that has so far borne some fruit (see Morgan, 2015).

At the regional level, new and alternative regional institutions have contributed significantly to a more independent Pacific diplomacy. The PIDF is the newest – and perhaps still the most controversial – regional body. Since its inauguration in 2013 it has gone through various stages of institutionalization. It is now in the process of applying for observer status at the UN (which would make it the third Pacific regional body to have this status, together with the Pacific Islands Forum and the Secretariat of the Pacific Community).

The PIDF has been seen by its advocates as a logical regional counterpart for the PSIDS group at the UN. The synergies have been especially evident when developing international negotiating positions for the Pacific, such as ahead of the Paris climate negotiations in 2015. But the PSIDS at the UN also rely on and work with a range of regional organizations that form the Council of Regional Organizations in the Pacific (CROP). The PIDF, together with CROP agencies, provided logistical support to Pacific governments in Paris. They are also part of the strategic planning being undertaken by UN PSIDS ambassadors on implementation of the Paris Climate Change Treaty and preparation for the UN Conference on Oceans and Seas (Government of Fiji, 2016).

The PIDF is now a fixture in the Pacific regional architecture. But it is perhaps easier to say what PIDF is not, than what it is. It is not another technical agency. Nor is it an intergovernmental CROP agency. It has been described variously as a convener, facilitator and coordinator. It has proved to be the place where new and 'outside the box' initiatives are launched and gain regional traction. At its Suva summit in 2015, the PIDF called for 'an international moratorium on the development and expansion of fossil fuel extracting industries'. In 2016 in Honiara, the PIDF considered a proposal for a climate treaty, which would include a commitment to phase out fossil fuels and a ban on new coal mines. The proposed treaty would also embrace the 'aspirational target of 1.5 degrees Celsius' that the Pacific island states have advocated (Slezak, 2016).

The unique membership and structure of the PIDF (which provides a space for non-government organizations and the private sector) means that it can push the boundaries of established thinking and policy. This is having some impact on the Pacific Islands Forum process – evident in the reaching out to civil society and others, and the attempt by the Pacific Islands Forum to create 'an open, inclusive public policy process' through the Framework for Pacific Regionalism (Taylor, 2015, p. 45).

Nowhere have the boundaries been so successfully and so decisively challenged than by the eight-member grouping known collectively as the Parties to the Nauru Agreement (PNA). Since its establishment as an independent entity in 2009, PNA has demonstrated, more than any other actor in regional affairs, the transformative power of new thinking. Outcomes that were not thought possible just 10 years ago are now the norm. This includes

a rate of return for tuna licences that is between 15 and 20% of catch value, where for decades the conventional orthodoxy was that countries could not expect more than 5%. PNA – through the Vessel Day Scheme – has turned the tables on distant water fishing nations who for so long exploited divisions and vulnerabilities of Pacific island states to dictate the rate of return.¹ It is now PNA members calling the shots on the management of their purse seine fishery – and other much bigger powers who have had to capitulate. This includes the US. The success of the PNA in creating unprecedented economic benefits for its members has meant that efforts to discredit it (such as at the 2015 Pacific Islands Forum summit when leaders agreed to a New Zealand proposal to consider alternative management measures) are themselves discredited (Radio New Zealand, 2015).

There are lessons for other regional organizations from PNA's experience. One lesson is that much can be achieved from a very streamlined, cost-effective organization, where key functions are outsourced and overheads are kept to a minimum. PNA is the ultimate example of the 'outcomes driven organization' that Tony de Brum referred to.

Another crucial lesson that PNA has demonstrated is that Pacific island countries are quite capable of taking control and successfully managing their resources (and their relations with each other and with outside powers) on their own. They do not need to be guided, mediated and funded by donors and aid agencies. Moreover, as Transform Aqorau put it, 'there should be no role for donors or countries from outside the Pacific Islands in the central strategic discussions about the use of the region's natural resources because their presence is divisive, and they can't be trusted' (PNA, 2016).

In global diplomacy, PSIDS at the UN have continued to evolve and this has irrevocably altered the way Pacific island states now operate at the global level. PSIDS at the UN have become the 'logical regional representative of Pacific Island developing countries in international negotiations' (Government of Fiji, 2016). There have been some notable successes, such as the campaign for a stand-alone Ocean Sustainable Development Goal. This established what has been described as a 'distinct and continuing brand of oceans diplomacy from Oceania' (Quirk and Hanich, 2016, p. 70). Another successful collective action by PSIDS at the UN led to the reinscription of French Polynesia on the UN list of non-self-governing territories by a UN General Assembly resolution in 2013. This was opposed not only by France but also by Australia, underscoring the autonomy the Pacific has achieved at the UN (Manoa, 2015).

PSIDS ambassadors are now exploring ways to engage directly with Pacific regional organizations that provide specialist technical support. This could lead to even more proactive and engaged diplomacy on a range of issues. Pacific states have worked collectively at the global level for some time, through various groups and associations (AOSIS is perhaps the best example of this). Since 2009 though, there has been a broadening and diversification of diplomatic strategies, including the formation of new ad hoc coalitions. One successful example was the formation of the High Ambition Coalition in the lead-up to the Paris Climate Conference in December 2015. This broad grouping of developed and developing nations, led by Marshall Islands Foreign Minister Tony de Brum, proved instrumental in achieving the 'first truly global climate deal' (Canete, 2015). This is innovative diplomacy that aims to get beyond the confines of established and seemingly rigid negotiating positions and formal negotiating groups.

A similar approach seems to be taking shape on the issue of self-determination for West Papua. In recent years this issue has emerged as one of the most intractable and divisive

in Pacific regional politics (Maclellan, 2015). In July 2016, the Pacific Coalition on West Papua was formed on the margins of the PIDE, reportedly at the instigation of the prime minister of Solomon Islands. It now includes six governments – Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Tuvalu, Nauru, Tonga and Marshall Islands – plus the umbrella representative of the Kanak independence movement in New Caledonia (FLNKS), the Pacific Islands Association of Non-Government Organizations (PIANGO) and the United Liberation Movement for West Papua. At the UN General Assembly in September 2016, leaders of all six countries raised the issue of West Papuan self-determination, calling for the UN Human Rights Council to initiate a ‘credible investigation’ of human rights violations (*Fiji Times*, 2016). This demonstrates a key feature of the new Pacific diplomacy: the way regional alignments can form to advance a political agenda (in this case self-determination for West Papua) which has been held back by the paralysis or delaying tactics of established groups and organizations (in this case the Pacific Islands Forum and Melanesian Spearhead Group).

Conclusion

As the above examples illustrate, there is a dynamism and activism in Pacific diplomacy that is being played out through national, regional and global initiatives and processes. Inspired by ‘outside the box’ ideas and a willingness to do things differently, the Pacific has found ways to get around the failings and shortcomings of established diplomatic practice. These shortcomings include the inhibiting – at times domineering – influence of Australia and New Zealand in the Pacific Islands Forum and related CROP agencies. They also include the recourse to consensus-based decision-making within regional forums, which can sometimes mean no decision or action is taken. The innovations in Pacific diplomacy described above are a response to the complexity and diversity of interests in the region, and the need for countries at times to pursue alternative strategies and partnerships to advance their interests.

The emphasis in this analysis on paradigm shift underscores what has changed and continues to change in Pacific politics and diplomacy. It aims to move beyond a status quo understanding of regional politics, and beyond more narrowly focused debates about geopolitical or institutional rivalries, to explore the impact and potential of Pacific island agency in regional and international affairs. There is now recognition in the Pacific of the importance of being more active and independent participants in regional and global processes and debates. As former Kiribati President Anote Tong stated: ‘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’ (Tong, 2015, p. 24). As discussed above, there are also now greater opportunities for Pacific states to exert influence and shape outcomes to further more effectively their diplomatic and development aspirations.

Note

1. The Vessel Day Scheme has been described as a management measure that sets a limit on the number of days purse seine vessels are allowed to fish in the waters of the PNA countries. The days are allocated to each party, who then charge fishing companies/vessels for each day they fish. Between 2010 and 2015, income earned by PNA countries from fishing fees grew from US\$64 million to US\$357 million. (Aqorau, 2015).

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