



- Climate Action is the Biggest Issue for the Pacific Island Countries
- 'Partners in the Blue Pacific' initiative rides roughshod over established regional processes
- Low Numbers of Pacific Island Women in Positions of Political Power

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“Time seems totally out of step with the reality of climate change’s impact on the lives of Pacific people.”

~ Vanuatu’s Prime Minister Bob Loughman

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CLIMATE ACTION IS THE BIGGEST ISSUE FOR THE PACIFIC ISLAND COUNTRIES

In mid-July the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) was held in Fiji’s capital Suva. Due to COVID it had been three years since leaders came together in person for this meeting. Absent were the Presidents of Kiribati and of the Marshall Islands, as their countries are withdrawing from the PIF, Nauru’s President due to a COVID pandemic wave and the Cook Islands Prime Minister because of an election campaign. Not invited were the 21 dialogue partners, countries with political or economic interests from outside the region, so leaders could focus on key issues without external factors.

There is concern by USA and Australia about China’s increasing influence in Pacific Island Countries, particularly with the recent agreement with the Solomon Islands. But for the Pacific Islanders themselves their primary security threat remains climate action.

The promise by new Australian Prime Minister, Anthony Albanese, to cut Australia’s CO2 emissions by 43% by 2030 was welcomed by Pacific Island leaders, but forum chair, Fiji Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama urged him “to go further for our family’s shared future by aligning Australia’s commitment to the 1.5 degree Celsius target”.

The Pacific Island countries believe that limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius is the key to their survival.

Prior to the Pacific Island Forum Australia's Climate Council published a report entitled *A fight for survival: Tackling the climate crisis is key to security in the Blue Pacific*. The Pacific Elders' Voice, the independent group of Pacific people who have been leaders in the region, describe it as a 'must-read' because the primary security threat to the Pacific islands at this time is climate change. The key findings of the report include:

- Without immediate action from the global community the Pacific Island countries face severe and irreversible climate impacts, including cyclones of worsening magnitude, rising sea levels, coastal flooding, drought, and loss of coral reefs and ecosystems.
- The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has stated that to have any reasonable chance of achieving the goals of the *Paris Agreement*, global emissions must be roughly halved by 2030.
- The latest assessment of the 2030 targets of all countries shows a catastrophic shortfall on the scale of action required.

The report calls on the Australian Government to act quickly to move beyond coal and gas and ensure Australia's emissions plummet during this decade. However, Australia is the world's largest exporter of liquified natural gas (LNG) and the new Australian Government currently has no plans for a managed phase out of gas production.

Ahead of the Pacific Island Forum, the Edmund Rice Centre and the Pacific Islands Climate Action Network facilitated a joint open letter to Prime Minister Albanese signed by 30 Pacific and Australian civil society organisations. It said:

'Currently, we understand that there are 27 coal mining projects referred for assessment under Australia's Environmental Protection Biodiversity Conservation Act. These coal mining expansion projects are awaiting the approval decisions of your government. If approved, together, they would produce over 16 billion tonnes of carbon emissions over their lifetime. This is equivalent to 35 times Australia's current annual reported emissions. New coal, oil, or gas projects must come to an end and all fossil fuels subsidies must immediately cease.'

Sources: [Smiles in Suva: the 51st Pacific Islands Forum leaders' meeting](#) by Tess Newton Cain and Stefan Armbuster, 19 July 2022, [Devpolicy Blog](#), published by the Development Policy Centre at the Australian National University; '*A fight for survival: Tackling the climate crisis is key to security in the Blue Pacific*', 8 July 2022, Climate Council; *Open letter to Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese*, 9 July 2022, www.pican.org

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'PARTNERS IN THE BLUE PACIFIC' INITIATIVE RIDES ROUGHSHOD OVER ESTABLISHED REGIONAL PROCESSES

On 24 June the White House announced the establishment of the Partners in the Blue Pacific (PBP), an initiative by Australia, Japan, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States "for more effective and efficient cooperation in support of Pacific Island priorities". We find the PBP initiative deceptive, controlling and hypocritical.

Its rhetoric of partnership, cooperation, respect for Pacific agendas, and reference to consultation with Pacific leaders, hides deeper geopolitical purpose. It proceeds in much the same way as China's recent attempt to establish a multilateral "Common Development Vision", delivering a *fait accompli* while ignoring established regional decision-making processes.

The PBP claims to be based on the principles of enhancing regionalism, putting the Pacific islands first, respecting sovereignty and transparency, and promoting the Blue Pacific agenda. But in its purpose and procedures it undermines these principles.

Co-opting the Blue Pacific narrative

The five PBP powers have co-opted the name and narrative of the 'Blue Pacific' to advance their interests, while implying they share Pacific Islands' agendas. The [Blue Pacific](#) is the region's cherished narrative; at the heart of it is self-empowerment, self-determination and regional solidarity.

Launched in 2017, the Blue Pacific narrative counters the framing of the Pacific as a site for geopolitical competition and incorporation into the Indo-Pacific project. It highlights the importance of the ocean – the 'Blue Continent'. It provides an expanded concept of security that is inclusive of humans and the environment. At the centre of its discussions is climate change, which Pacific Islands' leaders have identified as the most important existential threat to the region.

Whose regionalism? Whose regional architecture?

The [50-year history of Pacific regionalism](#) has been a history of the decolonisation of regional decision-making processes. The Pacific Islands Forum was built on the principle of self-determination and maximising Pacific Island states control of their relationship with larger powers in trade, security and colonial policies. This was achieved through restricting membership to Pacific Island countries and only extending an invitation to Australia and New Zealand because of their close geographical location and their economic support. From the late 1980s, the Forum invited outside powers as Dialogue Partners of the Forum. Canada, France, Japan, US and the UK were founding members; China joined in 1990. There are now 21 partners.

The PBP initiative upsets this established structure set up by the Pacific Islands states based on the doctrine of 'friends to all'. It effectively forms a special group of five 'like-minded' partners with a shared interest in displacing or competing with China. It runs roughshod over existing mechanisms devised by Pacific Island leaders to shape their interactions with larger powers and attempts to impose a new hierarchy of preferred 'partners' from outside.

Ignoring regional decision-making processes

While claiming this initiative has been based on consultation, there are questions about whether normal regional decision-making practices were bypassed. Consultation with Pacific Heads of Mission is inadequate since these are public servants and not political leaders, and interactions with the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat appear to have been cursory. As [argued by Samoa's Prime Minister](#) Fiame Naomi Mata'afa, a regional initiative of this magnitude should be discussed by the leaders collectively in their Forum meeting. When China sought to go outside such processes in May 2022 the PBP powers were the first to criticise. Now they are doing the same.

Constraining Forum sovereignty

This initiative puts the Partners in the Blue Pacific under the Pacific regionalism umbrella without permission and on its own terms. It excludes others such as China who are dialogue partners of the Forum, and who are clearly "delivering results" in the region and goes against the 'friends to all' doctrine of the Forum. It leaves island countries facing a consortium of development partners with a common vision – but not necessarily one shared by the Forum countries themselves. This constrains the sovereignty of the Pacific Islands Forum, as it is intended to do.

Source: This is an edited version of ['Partners in the Blue Pacific' initiative rides roughshod over established regional processes](#) by Greg Fry, Tarcisius Kabutaulaka and Terence Wesley-Smith. 5 July 2022, which first appeared on the [Devpolicy Blog](#) published by the Development Policy Centre at the Australian National University.

LOW NUMBERS OF PACIFIC ISLAND WOMEN IN POSITIONS OF POLITICAL POWER

Ten years ago the Pacific Leaders Gender Equality Declaration (PLGED) was signed with leaders committing “to increase the representation of women in legislatures.” A decade later the average percentage of women in parliament for the 13 countries which make up the Pacific Islands Forum has increased from 7.4% to 12.9%, but remove Australia and New Zealand, and the female representation in the Pacific Island countries sits at under 10%. The Devpolicy blog, *Time for action at the Forum on female political representation in the Pacific* by Stephen Howes and Sadhana Sen, published in July 2022, explains that Fiji, Samoa and Nauru have managed to cross the 10% threshold. Papua New Guinea had no female representation in the 2017 election, and in the recent 2022 election only two females gained seats.

Today the Pacific Island countries not only have the world’s lowest level of female political representation, but it is less than half of the next lowest region, Western and Central Africa.

For the first time in July this year high-level women from member states of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) convened the first Pacific Islands Forum Women Leaders Meeting (PIFWLM), which is to be held annually ahead of the PIF Leaders Meeting. Female Samoan Prime Minister Fiame Naomi Mata’afa gave the keynote address saying it was time for leaders “to move beyond rhetoric” and to focus on how to strengthen outcomes for women and girls. Australia’s gender equality program for Pacific women and girls which ran for ten years achieved only modest gains. Now the program is changing to a Pacific women-led program, called Pacific Women Lead, placing more emphasis on empowering women to lead, and less on supporting victims of violence.

In Samoa 10% of elected representatives – which is a total of five seats – must be female. However only *matai*, chiefs of an extended family, can be elected, and only 7% of Samoa’s 1228 *matai* were female at the last survey in 2015, according to Jessica Collins’ article for the Lowy Institute, *A few remarkable wins for Pacific women in local politics*, 18 February 2022. And 10% of villages prohibit women from becoming *matai*.

Between 2017 and 2022 Papua New Guinea has had no female representation in parliament. In the recent 2022 election 142 females ran for election out of 3,000 for 118 seats. Rufina Peter of the Peoples National Party won a seat in Central Province, and Kessy Sawang was declared the member of parliament for the Rai Coast. With James Marape as Prime Minister PNG’s 11th parliament is once again male dominated.

In Fiji female representation has increased to 21%. Women hold 10 of Fiji’s 51 seats. But Vanuatu and Tonga have no female representatives in their parliaments.

*Sources: [Time for action at the Forum for female political representation in the Pacific](#) by Stephen Howes and Sadhana Sen, 8 July 2022, [Devpolicy Blog](#), published by the Development Policy Centre at the Australian National University; *A few remarkable wins for Pacific women in local politics* by Jessica Collins, 18 February 2022, *The Interpreter* published by the Lowy Institute, and [Women in the 2022 PNG elections](#) by Orovu Segoe, Lesley Clark and Teddy Winn, 22 August 2022, [Devpolicy Blog](#), published by the Development Policy Centre at the Australian National University.*

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