

What now for the debate on the future of Pacific regional architecture?

By Greg Fry
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The cancellation of the planned Sydney summit of Pacific leaders should not be taken as signaling the end of the debate about the future of Pacific regional architecture. Although there have been a number of [reviews](#) of the structure and functions of Pacific regional institutions, there is still a need for a debate about the overall governance and configuration of future regional architecture in the light of Fiji's recent return to democracy in September 2014 and its [refusal](#) to resume its membership of the Pacific Islands Forum unless it undergoes radical reforms.

Dame Meg Taylor, the dynamic new Secretary-General of the Pacific Islands Forum, has recognised this need. She has been [reported on Radio New Zealand International](#) as saying

that ‘a discussion on regional architecture at this time, is I think, important. To ignore it is just to put a lid on sentiments that have been expressed and I think it is important to have a rigorous discussion around this’. She went on to say that:

They have to get in a room. They have to discuss this. They have to consider before they come into the room all the consequences of all the different scenarios of what could happen. I would like to see Fiji be back as a very active member of the PIF because it is a very valuable member of the Pacific region.

What are the scenarios currently on the ‘table’? The first is the Fiji Government proposal that the Pacific Islands Forum become an all-island Forum run by Pacific islanders, for Pacific islanders. As [explained](#) by Prime Minister Bainimarama, ‘we are not interested in going back until it [the PIF] stops being the play thing of the Aussies and Kiwis. When it becomes a genuine expression of the will of the Pacific Islanders themselves, then we will go back, then we will think about re-joining the Forum’. This model draws on the example of regional organisations of developing countries elsewhere in the world – ASEAN, CARICOM, African Union, etc. In such a scenario, Australia and New Zealand would become special dialogue partners in an inner circle of Forum partnerships with donor countries. Underpinning this model is the idea that the Pacific island states need to control their own diplomatic agenda without the distortion provided by the very different agendas of their large, developed neighbours; and that to deal effectively on key global agendas such as climate change it is a strategic necessity that the region organise as an association of small developing island states so that they can be accepted in global southern coalitions such as AOSIS, and G77 and China. Leveraging Pacific positions through such coalitions, it is argued, is crucial for small island states in contemporary global diplomacy. The strategic case for exclusion has been most persuasively argued by Ambassador [Kaliopate Tavola](#) and by [Derek Brien](#) of the Pacific Institute of Public Policy. Foreign Minister Bishop has [indicated](#) that Australia would not take the adoption of such a model ‘lying down’. It has also been rejected explicitly by Papua New Guinea’s Prime Minister, [Peter O’Neill](#), and Palau’s President, [Tommy Remengesau](#). There has as yet been no explicit support for the exclusion proposal by any Pacific island leader.

A [second scenario](#), proposed by the Fiji Government as an alternative if the first scenario is not agreed to, is one in which all Pacific development partners – Japan, China, Korea, USA, etc – are invited to become full members of the Pacific Islands Forum sitting alongside the Pacific island states as equal members. Given the Fiji Government’s strong stance on achieving an independent Pacific voice in regional diplomacy this has the ring of a rhetorical

point rather than a serious alternative. It is surely a debating point, meant to emphasise the inappropriateness of Australia and New Zealand sitting in the Islands Forum as equal members in a southern organisation when they are in fact development partners rather than developing island state recipients. This proposal clearly goes against the principle of regional self-determination that Fiji has enunciated and acted upon elsewhere. It would in any case be a non-starter politically for all other Pacific island states, and for Australia and New Zealand, which would not welcome the membership of any other metropolitan powers.

A third scenario is that of doing nothing and maintaining the status quo. This will be the default outcome if no debate takes place. Under this scenario, Fiji will not resume its membership of the PIF; and it will continue to promote the Pacific Islands Development Forum (PIDF), Pacific Small Developing Island States grouping (PSIDS), and the Melanesia Spearhead Group (MSG), as an alternate and competing regional system financially supported by Russia, China, UAE, Indonesia and others. Furthermore, if there is no debate about how the Pacific Islands Forum system might work with other parts of this alternate diplomatic system – a system which has gained considerable support from Pacific Island countries – then we would see the entrenchment of two competing Pacific regional systems with overlapping membership. This would hamper Pacific unity on important issues and spread scarce human and financial resources thinly and inefficiently.

A fourth scenario follows from the more conciliatory language in recent pronouncements by the Fiji and Australian foreign ministers. The Fiji foreign minister, Inoke Kubuabola, has [denied](#) that Fiji's position was one of being 'bent on the eviction of Australia and New Zealand from the Pacific Islands Forum'. Rather he is reported as saying that 'regional governance of the Pacific Islands is primarily the responsibility of the island nations themselves' and it is therefore 'logical that metropolitan developed countries like Australia and New Zealand take a step back'. Foreign Minister Bishop provided an equally important basis for dialogue on a compromise scenario in her comments on the proposed regional summit during her visit to Papua New Guinea in December 2014. She [said](#) 'it was time for Pacific leaders to chart their own course ... adding that a Sydney summit early next year could set the regional architecture in place for that to happen.'

There are a number of reform strategies that could be discussed under the broad umbrella of this fourth scenario which ensure Australia and New Zealand 'step back' and the Pacific island states have a greater control over 'charting their own course'. I canvass some of them in my recent SSGM Discussion Paper '[Recapturing the Spirit of 1971](#)'. They include: embracing, rather than competing with, the new Pacific island-controlled diplomatic system which has emerged outside the PIF network in the past five years to meet strategic needs in

global and regional diplomacy; the re-introduction of the island caucus system within the PIF; and changing the financial arrangements of the PIF to allow for more Pacific island ownership (Australia and New Zealand currently provide about 95 per cent of the combined core and regular budget).

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